

St Patrick's Pontifical University  
Maynooth

The Place of the Body: *Leiblichkeit* in the Theology of Karl Rahner

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A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of Theology in partial fulfilment of the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor in Theology

Supervisor: Professor Michael A. Conway

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## Declaration

I declare that this dissertation is the result of my own original research, reading, and reflection. All sources used have been duly acknowledged. This dissertation is submitted to the Faculty of Theology, St. Patrick's Pontifical University, Maynooth, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor in Theology (Systematics). It has not been submitted to any other university or college for academic credit.



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*15 September 2025*

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## **Dedication**

To those who work for the bodily well-being of all God's creatures in the world.

## Epigraph

*Diese eine totale Leiblichkeit als der von vornherein gemeinsame Raum, der eine Interkommunikation zwischen den einzelnen geistigen Subjekten erlaubt, dieser eine konkrete Raum kann natürlich vom einzelnen geistigen Subjekt so oder so angenommen, geliebt, geduldet oder gehasst werden.*

(This one total bodily existence as the common space that makes intercommunication between individual spiritual subjects possible; this concrete space can, of course, be accepted by the individual spiritual subject in different ways: it can be loved, tolerated, or hated).

— Karl Rahner

## Abstract

This dissertation explores the central role of *Leiblichkeit* (“bodiliness”) in the theology of Karl Rahner (1904–1984), arguing that bodiliness functions as a foundational key across his entire theological corpus. While secondary scholarship has acknowledged the concrete and historical dimensions of human experience, it has largely overlooked *Leiblichkeit* as a distinct theological category. This study addresses that gap by showing that bodiliness provides a unifying hermeneutical framework for interpreting Rahner’s reflections on spirituality, philosophy, grace, Christology, anthropology, ecclesiology, and eschatology.

The dissertation is divided into two parts: the first examines the spiritual and philosophical dimensions of bodiliness as the ground of mystical experience and human knowledge; the second explores its theological implications, demonstrating how Rahner’s thought is intrinsically grounded in historicity and human embodiment. The central claim is that bodiliness functions as a leitmotif in Rahner’s theology—an existential medium of relationality and encounter with being in the world. By reclaiming the significance of bodiliness, this study deepens the interpretation of Rahner’s theology and opens new avenues for dialogue with the human sciences, including bioethics, feminist theory, ecological theology, psychology, artificial intelligence (AI), and philosophical anthropology.

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## General Introduction

This dissertation investigates the central role of bodiliness (*Leiblichkeit*) in the theology of Karl Rahner.<sup>1</sup> Emerging from my earlier research (MTh, 2001) into Rahner's anthropology, the study has matured through sustained engagement with the historical embeddedness of the human person in Rahner's thought. Over time, it became increasingly clear that, while Rahnerian scholarship frequently acknowledges the importance of the concrete, historical, and experiential dimensions of existence (categorical experience), the theme of bodiliness has not received systematic or sustained analysis in its own right. This research seeks to address that gap by offering an investigation of bodiliness as a foundational and unifying category within Rahner's spiritual, philosophical, and theological writings.

### 1. Defining Bodiliness (*Leiblichkeit*)

*Leiblichkeit*, as developed across Rahner's works, is first explicitly introduced in his 1939 seminal work *Geist in Welt (Spirit in the World)*, and later expanded in his theology to encompass the entire historically lived dimension of human existence. Importantly, *Leiblichkeit* signifies more than the mere possession of a physical body (*Körperlichkeit*); it denotes the embodied, spiritual, personal, and relational mode of human existence in its full

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1. Karl Rahner was born on March 5, 1904, in Freiburg im Breisgau, Germany. In 1922, he entered the Society of Jesus in the Upper German Province, beginning his novitiate in Feldkirch-Vorarlberg, Austria. He was ordained a priest in 1932 at St. Michael's Church in Munich. He pursued advanced studies in philosophy at the University of Freiburg from 1934 to 1936, before earning his doctorate in theology at the University of Innsbruck in 1936. His academic career began in earnest in 1939, when he commenced lecturing as a professor of theology. In the early 1960s, Pope John XXIII named him as a theological adviser (*peritus*) to Cardinal Franz König in preparation for the Second Vatican Council. He continued to serve as professor of Dogmatic Theology until his retirement in 1971. He died in 1984, leaving behind an extraordinary intellectual legacy. Often described as "the quiet mover of the Roman Catholic Church" and "the Father of the Catholic Church in the twentieth century," Rahner authored over 4,000 works, addressing virtually every major theological theme—including Christology, anthropology, spirituality, eschatology, pastoral theology, ecumenism, and interreligious dialogue. Andrew Tallon writes the following about him: "The greatest Catholic theologian of the twentieth century"—for nearly a half century this is how we have been describing Karl Rahner. Today his reputation is more solid than ever: he has become the one to challenge. As we head into the third Christian millennium, there is every indication to believe that a foundation in Rahner will be the ticket to theology's agenda for the twenty-first century."

concreteness. It refers to the existential reality of the human person as a spirit-in-world—always already both bodily and spiritual. Bodiliness expresses the fundamental condition of the human person as a unity of spirit and matter, wherein the body is not merely an appendage to the person but constitutive of personhood itself: human beings are spiritual precisely because they are bodily. In Rahner’s perspective, embodied existence identifies the concrete and historical dimension of human existence as a theological place—a *locus theologicus*, to use the term of Melchor Cano—of encounter between the human and the divine. In this sense, since the world and history are the very place where the divine encounters the human, both history and cosmos also become intrinsic to the meaning of human bodiliness. While the term itself has been variously translated in English—for example, as “corporeality” (William V. Dych) or “bodiliness” (Margaret Kohl)—this dissertation adopts bodiliness consistently to emphasize its dual material and spiritual significance as the concrete site where the divine encounters the human in the world.

Although Rahner does not devote a single monograph or essay to bodiliness, it emerges as a key hermeneutical category for interpreting his spiritual, philosophical, and theological writings. In his spiritual writings, philosophy, doctrine of grace, Christology, anthropology, ecclesiology, and eschatology, Rahner presents the human person not as a composite of body and soul, but as a unified bodily spirit, open from the very beginning of creation to the possibility of relationship with God, the Absolute Being. Within this framework, bodiliness is the concrete medium through which the divine enters into and relates with the human person in the world. Rahner’s theology resists dualistic tendencies, both Platonic and Neo-Scholastic, that separate the natural from the supernatural, the spiritual from the material, and the experience of grace from the humdrum experiences of daily life.

Rahner’s early works from the 1930s and 1940s already affirm the natural order of existence as supernaturally oriented towards divine life. What the mystics describe variously

as “spiritual senses,” “the supernatural,” and “grace” refers to a specific ordering or “elevation” of the concretely embodied human subject towards a spiritual experience of the divine. This insight became the central philosophical thesis of *Geist in Welt*, where Rahner emphasized, following St. Thomas, that the material dimension of human experience (sensibility)—which culminates in human bodiliness—is the metaphysical ground or condition of the possibility (*Bedingung der Möglichkeit*) for all human experience and knowledge. Rahner further developed this perspective in his 1941 pre-theological monograph *Hörer des Wortes (Hearers of the Word)*, where he established historical and material (bodily) existence as the ontological conditions that make the human person capable of “hearing” a possible divine revelation in the world.

Rahner grounds his theology in the Incarnation, making human bodiliness central to his theological vision. Here, he presented the divine as a human-shaped God (God-Man) in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. In the Incarnation, the unity between the supernatural and the natural, the transcendental and the categorial, and the material and the spiritual becomes concrete in human bodiliness—the Word made flesh. With this decisive emphasis on the centrality of the Incarnation for all theological discourse, Rahner placed human bodiliness at the centre of both his theology and spiritual writings.

In his 1959 essay “Zur Theologie des Symbols” (“The Theology of the Symbol”), Rahner argues that theology becomes fully intelligible only when it is understood as a theology of the symbol. A real symbol (*Realsymbol*), according to Rahner, is the highest and most primordial mode in which one reality can represent another. It is the concrete manner in which a being realizes itself in an “other” in such a way that this self-realization becomes a constitutive essence of the being itself. A visible bodily form thus becomes the most primordial and concrete symbolic representation of a being’s essence. In this light, Rahner identifies the Incarnation of Christ as the absolute concrete symbol of God in the world, and

the human body as the real symbol of the whole human person in the spiritual unity of body and soul. He describes the “flesh” (*Fleisch*) of Christ—that is, the humanity (*Menschheit*) of Jesus—as the real and tangible symbol of the divine Logos. In turn, he defines the Church as the persisting presence of the Incarnate Word in space and time, the fundamental sacramental symbol (*Ursakrament*) of salvation in the world.

Rahner’s writings consistently present bodiliness as a central theological category. In 1967, he co-edited with Alois Görres the major theological volume *Der Leib und das Heil: Probleme der Praktischen Theologie*. In this collection, his essay “Der Leib in der Heilsordnung” (“The Body in the Order of Salvation”) underscores that divine revelation occurs *through* the body, and that human bodiliness is the sole access to a meaningful experience of God’s self-communication as saving grace. Across numerous works and essays, Rahner employs the terms “body” (*Leib*), “bodiliness” (*Leiblichkeit*), “bodily [incarnate] presence” (*Leibhaftigkeit*), and “embodiment” (*Verleiblichung*) to address central questions across the major loci of his theology. Bodiliness thus emerges not as an incidental concern but as a foundational category in his theological vision. God has revealed Godself to the world through human bodiliness in the person of Jesus Christ, in whom Rahner discerns the inseparable relationship between Christology and anthropology. He notably asserts that Christology may be studied as self-transcendent anthropology, and anthropology as deficient Christology. While some theologians have described Rahner’s emphasis on the human person as the “anthropological turn,” this turn is more precisely a turn towards human bodiliness and historicity. Accordingly, the question of bodiliness and embodiment will serve as the focal point of this dissertation.

## 2. Research Question

Bodiliness is the central locus for interpreting Rahner’s theology. It provides the key to understanding the major themes of his spiritual, philosophical, and theological writings:

divine revelation, the nature and operation of grace, the historical possibility of transcendental experience, the constitution of the human person as a supernatural existential, and the historical meaning of salvation. Grounded above all in his theology of the Incarnation, bodiliness for Rahner is not merely a topic for theological reflection but the very condition that makes theology itself possible. The guiding research question of this dissertation is therefore: To what extent does Rahner's focus on *Leiblichkeit*, understood as the concretely embodied and historically lived dimension of human existence, shape the structure, content, and coherence of his spiritual, philosophical, and theological writings?

### 3. Survey of Scholarship

Bodiliness as a critical category in Rahner's theology remains underrepresented in secondary literature, despite early scholarship emphasising his turn to concrete, historical human experience as the locus of divine revelation. A survey of existing scholarship confirms the necessity of this research. Among the earliest to recognize the significance of Rahner's turn to concrete experience were Charles Muller and Herbert Vorgrimler, who, in their 1965 volume *Karl Rahner*, underscored the intrinsic relationship between grace and the concrete order of creation, arguing that divine revelation—as grace—must be understood within the historical context of human life. In 1968, Florent Gaboriau, in *Le tournant théologique aujourd'hui selon K. Rahner*, argued that any transcendental theology detached from concrete experience remains conceptually deficient, emphasising the necessity of human historicity for theological reflection. In 1980, Karl-Heinz Weger, in *Karl Rahner: An Introduction to His Theology*, described Rahner's anthropology as beginning with the human person as an “open system”—a spirit who encounters God through pre-conceptual, existential experience. Similarly, George Vass, in his three-volume *Understanding Karl Rahner*, consistently highlights the centrality of concrete experience: Volume 1 presents Rahner's philosophical search as fundamentally oriented towards the concrete; Volume 2 interprets his anthropology

as a process of historical becoming; and Volume 3 links doctrinal development to the dynamics of human experience in the world. Finally, Herbert Vorgrimler's later work, *Understanding Karl Rahner* (1986), reaffirms that the so-called Rahner's "anthropological turn" marks a decisive shift towards the concrete subject as the proper starting point for Rahner's theology.

The 1995 collection *A World of Grace*, edited by Leo O'Donovan, gathers essays that underscore Rahner's consistent emphasis on concrete, historical existence as the privileged locus of divine-human encounter. Richard Lennan presents the Church as the effective symbol of grace—a visible sacrament of salvation situated within the concrete world. Michael Fahey and John Carmody likewise highlight the Church's visibility and sacramentality as tangible expressions of the divine-human relationship. Otto Hentz interprets the Incarnation as God's categorial self-revelation to the world, while William Thompson describes Rahner's eschatology as inseparably embedded in lived human experience. Brian McDermott emphasizes that, for Rahner, freedom is always a historical and embodied act involving the whole person in their concrete situation. James Bresnahan and Harvey D. Egan root divine love and grace in the ordinariness of embodied human life, and Peter Phan draws attention to the continuity between bodily existence and eschatological fulfilment. Together, these contributions attest to the centrality of the embodied, historical condition of the human person in Rahner's theological vision.

Since 2000, significant studies have reinforced Rahner's grounding of theology in concrete, historical existence. In *Karl Rahner* (2000), William V. Dych identifies the bodily Incarnation of Christ as Rahner's theological starting point—God's entry into time and space in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Anton Losinger, in *The Anthropological Turn* (2000), argues that Rahner's theology takes concrete human existence in the world as its only viable point of departure. Stephen Fields, in *Being as Symbol: On the Origins and Development of*

*Karl Rahner's Metaphysics* (2000), examines how embodiment is integral to symbolic cognition and sacramental theology, demonstrating the inseparability of the intellectual and experiential in human self-understanding. Bernard Sesboüé, in *Karl Rahner* (2001), stresses the unity of salvation history and world history, while Karsten Kreutzer, in *Transzendentes versus Hermeneutisches Denken* (2002), critically contends that transcendental experience in Rahner is always mediated through historical existence. Patrick Burke, in *Reinterpreting Rahner* (2002), insists that grace cannot be experienced apart from one's social and historical situation, and John O'Donnell, in *Karl Rahner: Life in the Spirit* (2004), underscores the intrinsic connection between Rahner's vision of God, creation, and the Incarnation.

The *Cambridge Companion to Karl Rahner* (2005), edited by Declan Marmion and Mary E. Hines, brings together leading Rahner scholars who further underscore the centrality of categorical, human experience in his theology. Stephen Duffy defines grace as the concrete gift of God's very self, while Daniel Donovan describes revelation as God's historical self-giving in Jesus of Nazareth. Harvey D. Egan grounds Rahner's spirituality in the everyday, bodily life of the believer, and Richard Lennan emphasizes the Church's sacramental presence as the historical mediation of grace. Roman Siebenrock centres Rahner's Christology on the historicity of Jesus, while Brian Linnane and Peter Phan show that Rahner's ethics and eschatology remains firmly anchored in embodied human existence.

Recent scholarship continues to affirm that Rahner's theology is inseparably grounded in the historical character of human existence. In *God in the World: A Guide to Rahner's Theology* (2007), Thomas O'Meara emphasizes that Rahner's ecclesiology is rooted in the Church as a concrete, historical community—the People of God. In *Karl Rahner: A Brief Introduction* (2007), Karen Kilby underscores that transcendental experience is, for Rahner, always mediated through categorical, concrete human existence in the world. Pádraic Conway and Fáinche Ryan, in *Karl Rahner: Theologian for the Twenty-First Century*

(2010), argue that the experience of God cannot be abstracted from the concrete, historical lives of human beings. Gregory Brett, in *The Theological Notion of the Human Person: A Conversation between the Theology of Karl Rahner and the Philosophy of John MacMurray* (2013), contends that the human person's transcendental orientation takes shape only within the embodied, relational matrix of history, affirming that grace and freedom are realities enacted through interpersonal relationships. Similarly, David Sendrez, in *L'Expérience de Dieu chez Karl Rahner* (2013), insists that theological knowledge and religious experience are always mediated through the bodily senses and the spatio-temporal conditions of human existence.

#### **4. The Research Gap**

Yet, despite widespread recognition of Rahner's turn to concrete, historical existence, no sustained study has yet examined bodiliness (*Leiblichkeit*) as a central theological category. This dissertation seeks to address that gap. While scholars consistently emphasize the material, historical, and categorial dimensions of his thought, they typically address these only in relation to broader theological loci—such as grace, the Incarnation, anthropology, ecclesiology, spirituality, or eschatology. What remains absent is a systematic and comprehensive treatment of bodiliness as a theological category in its own right. To date, no work within the English-language bibliography on Rahner has undertaken such a focused investigation. This study therefore argues that Rahner's theology must be read through the lens of bodiliness as the primary locus of divine–human encounter.

#### **5. Methodology and Scope**

This study employs a qualitative methodology to demonstrate that *Leiblichkeit* (bodiliness) functions as a foundational and unifying category in Rahner's theology, examined across its spiritual, philosophical, and theological dimensions. It combines library-based research, close

textual analysis, comparative study, and historical investigation to address a lacuna in the secondary literature. The primary focus is Rahner's own writings, with particular attention to selected texts analysed chronologically, beginning with his earliest relevant publications. This approach reflects how bodiliness develops as a recurring and sustained theme across Rahner's spiritual, philosophical, and theological corpus. While these texts do not exhaust Rahner's treatment of *Leiblichkeit*, they provide significant points of entry into his wider theological vision.

In presenting the content, attention is given to questions of language. Gendered terms appearing in direct quotations (e.g., *man, he, his*) are retained for fidelity to the original texts. In the author's own analysis, however, gender-inclusive language is employed wherever possible, with substitutions made only outside of direct citations. This practice ensures both accuracy in textual interpretation and sensitivity to contemporary linguistic concerns. Furthermore, direct quotations in this thesis have been intentionally and, at times, unavoidably kept long. This is done to situate the reader within the full context of the discussion and to preserve the integrity of Rahner's thought, ensuring that his views are conveyed with accuracy and fidelity.

To situate Rahner's development of *Leiblichkeit* as a critical category, this study also engages primary works from his formative philosophical influences, most notably Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), Joseph Maréchal (1878–1944), and Pierre Rousselot (1878–1915). The influence of Rousselot and Maréchal becomes particularly clear when read against the backdrop of Neo-Scholasticism and Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. These figures are considered only insofar as they illuminate Rahner's appropriation of bodiliness within his own philosophical framework and its subsequent integration into his theology.

Rahner's thought has elicited sustained responses from both supporters and critics. While these perspectives are not treated at length here, references are included where

necessary to direct the reader towards further discussion and alternative critical engagements with his theology. Taken together, the methodology employed in this study demonstrates that Rahner's reflections on bodiliness are constitutive of his theological project and that *Leiblichkeit* offers a fruitful hermeneutical lens through which to interpret his theology in dialogue with broader philosophical and theological traditions.

This dissertation is constructive and hermeneutical in orientation, offering a critical reinterpretation of Rahner's theology through the lens of *Leiblichkeit*. Its purpose is to retrieve and systematically re-read this neglected category as a horizon that unifies Rahner's spiritual, philosophical, and theological writings. The study is not polemical: it does not rehearse debates with Rahner's contemporaries nor seek to evaluate his theology against alternative schools. Rather, it offers a fresh interpretive synthesis of Rahner's own corpus, showing how bodiliness provides the key for understanding his theology as a whole.

## 6. Structure of the Dissertation

The dissertation comprises two main parts. Part I, "Spiritual and Philosophical Foundations of *Leiblichkeit* in Karl Rahner" (Chapters 1–5), examines the spiritual, mystical, philosophical, and metaphysical dimensions of his thought, showing the indispensability of bodiliness for spirituality and for all human experience, knowledge, and relation to being in the world. Part II, "Theological Perspectives on *Leiblichkeit* in Karl Rahner" (Chapters 6–10), addresses explicitly theological themes—grace, Christology, anthropology, ecclesiology, and eschatology—demonstrating how his reflections on bodiliness shape, unify, and deepen his broader theological framework.

Chapter 1 examines the role of bodily experience in Rahner's spirituality, presenting embodiment as the necessary medium for human encounter with God. Engaging figures such as Origen, Bonaventure, Clement of Alexandria, and Ignatius of Loyola, Rahner affirms the bodily dimension of human existence (*Leiblichkeit*) as essential to authentic mystical

experience. The “spiritual senses” in Origen and Bonaventure, Clement’s notion of the *ὑπερκόσμιος*, and the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius serve as key hermeneutical tools for understanding mystical experience in Rahner as inherently embodied and historical.

Chapters 2–5 analyse Rahner’s early philosophical works to show that all intellectual knowing and the possibility of divine revelation are grounded in the embodied, sensory dimension of human existence (*Leiblichkeit*). Chapters 2–4 focus on *Geist in Welt*, examining Rahner’s engagement with Thomistic metaphysics and epistemology. Here, Rahner reinterprets St. Thomas’ theory of knowledge through a modern transcendental framework, arguing that the intellect never operates in isolation but is always in original unity with sensibility. Bodiliness thus becomes the necessary condition for intellectual knowledge and for the human experience of, and relationship with, being in the world. Chapter 5 turns to *Hörer des Wortes*, exploring the metaphysical and anthropological foundations of divine revelation. Rahner presents the human being as a “hearer” of the Word, whose concrete, material existence is the indispensable condition for receiving and responding to God’s self-communication as grace.

Chapter 6 examines Rahner’s theology of grace, focusing on his concept of the “supernatural existential.” Grace, for Rahner, is not a supernatural addition or external supplement to human nature but an intrinsic, God-given reality from the very beginning—a constitutive element of what it means to be human. In this perspective, the embodied and historical nature of human existence (*Leiblichkeit*) is the medium through which divine revelation, as grace, becomes historical and visibly concrete in the world. Chapter 7 presents Rahner’s Christology, emphasising the Incarnation, the embodied humanity of Christ, as both the historical reality and the decisive event in which God becomes visibly present in the world as grace. The bodily Incarnation of Christ is not only the foundation of Rahner’s

Christology but also the paradigm for understanding the theological relationship between the divine and the human.

Chapter 8 examines theological anthropology from an incarnational perspective. It presents bodiliness as a real symbol (*Realsymbol*)—the concrete medium through which a being or reality becomes fully and tangibly present in space and time. Human bodiliness (*Leiblichkeit*) is the visible, historical self-expression of the total person as spirit-in-world. Chapter 9 turns to Rahner’s ecclesiology, analysing the Church as the Mystical Body of Christ—a visible, historical community that continues to mediate Christ’s saving presence in the world. Through its concrete juridical and sacramental structures, the Church becomes the enduring bodily symbol and instrument of God’s grace in history. Chapter 10, the final chapter, addresses Rahner’s eschatology, demonstrating that bodiliness retains enduring theological significance within God’s salvific plan. The body, far from being a temporary vessel for the soul, is essential to the final consummation of human existence in God. Rahner envisions the resurrection not as the soul’s release from the body, but as the transfiguration of cosmic history and human embodiment into the fullness of eternal life.

## 7. Research Claim

Overall, this dissertation contends that Rahner’s theology is most coherently understood as a theology of bodiliness. Across his reflections on mystical spirituality, philosophy, and theology, Rahner consistently identifies the concretely embodied dimension of human existence (*Leiblichkeit*) as the axis upon which all meaningful human knowledge and encounter with being, including the Absolute Being, depend. Far from occupying a marginal place, bodiliness emerges as the central hermeneutical category for reading and interpreting Rahner’s works. The Incarnation, “the Word became flesh,” is the primary point of departure for this hermeneutic. It signifies that, through bodiliness, the human person is, from the outset, intrinsically related to the world, to others, and to God, the Absolute

Incomprehensible Mystery. By retrieving *Leiblichkeit* as the unifying core of Rahner's theology, this dissertation argues that bodiliness is not simply one theme among others but the constitutive horizon within which Rahner's anthropology, Christology, ecclesiology, and eschatology achieve consistency and coherence.

**PART I**

**SPIRITUAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS OF *LEIBLICHKEIT* IN  
KARL RAHNER**

## Chapter 1

### Human Experience in Christian Spirituality: Rahner's Early Theological Sources

In his early essays on mysticism and later in his writings on Ignatian spirituality, Rahner develops a vision of Christian spirituality that is inseparably bound to concrete existence. For him, the human body and the material world are not distractions from the soul's ascent to God but the very medium in which God's self-communication is encountered. Against dualistic tendencies that oppose matter to spirit, nature to grace, or contemplation to action, Rahner reinterprets the tradition of Christian spirituality as affirming the world as the indispensable locus of divine encounter.

This chapter examines Rahner's engagement with four figures—Origen (c. 185–254), Bonaventure (1221–1274), Clement of Alexandria (c. 150–215), and Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556)—to show how each contributes to his theology, emphasising *Leiblichkeit* as central to the spiritual life. In Origen, Rahner highlights the doctrine of the “spiritual senses,” where mystical knowledge of God is awakened through purification in the material world. In Bonaventure, he interprets the spiritual senses as concrete acts of intellect and will that culminate in ecstatic love (*amor ecstaticus*). In Clement, he finds an early affirmation of the unity of nature and grace in the language of the *ὑπερκόσμιος* (“supermundane”), which anticipates the modern understanding of the supernatural. Finally, in Ignatius, he discovers a spirituality grounded in the Incarnation and in discipleship, where God's presence is discerned in the concreteness of daily life. Together, these explorations demonstrate that for Rahner, Christian spirituality unfolds not by escaping the material world and human embodiment but by encountering God within and through both.

## 1.1. “The Spiritual Senses” in Origen

Rahner’s interpretation of Origen’s doctrine of the “spiritual senses” is developed in his early study “Le début d’une doctrine des cinq sens spirituels chez Origène” (1932).<sup>2</sup> He identifies in Origen a foundational attempt to articulate the human experience of God through sensory metaphors, sight, hearing, taste, touch, and smell, understood not as literal bodily senses but as spiritual faculties rooted in the soul. This section examines two key aspects of Rahner’s interpretation: (1) the use of sensory metaphors in describing the spiritual senses, and (2) the relationship between the active life (*praxis*) and the contemplative life (*theorie*) in Origen’s account of spiritual development.

### 1.1.1. Sensory Metaphors and the Soul’s Perception of God

Origen’s doctrine of the spiritual senses represents a formative milestone in early Christian thought, providing a foundation for understanding mystical experience through sensory metaphors.<sup>3</sup> As Rahner interprets him, Origen was among the earliest Christian theologians to employ the metaphors of sight, hearing, taste, touch, and smell to describe what he called “spiritual senses.”<sup>4</sup> These metaphors bear no literal connection to the physical senses, but instead refer to faculties that are divine in origin. In Rahner’s reading of Origen, the human person “possesses, over and above his bodily faculties, ‘a sense for the divine, which is completely different from the senses as normally described’ or simply ‘divine

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2. See Karl Rahner, “Le début d’une doctrine des cinq sens spirituels chez Origène,” in *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 1, *Frühe spirituelle Texte und Studien: Grundlagen im Orden*, ed. Karl Kardinal Lehmann and Albert Raffelt (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2014), 16–64; “The ‘Spiritual Senses’ according to Origen,” in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 16, *Experience of the Spirit: Source of Theology*, trans. David Morland (New York: Seabury, 1979), 81–103.

3. See Rahner, “The ‘Spiritual Senses’ according to Origen,” 81.

4. See Rahner, “The ‘Spiritual Senses’ according to Origen,” 82. Origen describes “spiritual senses” as “a sense for the divine.” While it is not clear what he meant by “a sense for the divine,” Rahner acknowledges that he distinguishes the five spiritual senses from the five bodily senses.

faculties of sense’.”<sup>5</sup> The spiritual senses, therefore, are entirely distinct from the bodily senses. So central are these spiritual faculties that Origen, according to Rahner, holds that the bodily senses must be subdued for the soul to perceive clearly: “a man must free himself from domination by the physical faculties, so that the eye of the soul has clarity of vision to the extent to which we close the eye of the body.”<sup>6</sup> For Origen, as Rahner interprets him, spiritual perception thus requires a form of detachment from bodily distractions, enabling the soul’s “divine faculties of sense” to be awakened to the presence of God.

According to Rahner, although Origen does not interpret the sensory metaphors he employs to describe mystical experience in a literal sense, neither are these metaphors merely symbolic. Origen’s understanding of the spiritual senses remains grounded in a real connection with the material world, the locus of the soul’s purification.<sup>7</sup> Rahner observes that while Origen frequently speaks of the spiritual senses as “faculties of the soul” that perceive divine realities, he often restricts actual knowledge of the divine to the spirit, or the “faculties of the spirit.” Although Origen does not draw a consistent or systematic distinction between “soul” and “spirit”—and often uses the terms interchangeably—Rahner notes that the term spirit generally refers to the soul in its “purified” state, “cleansed” through its engagement with material existence:

One should first of all point to the well-known distinction between soul and spirit [*La distinction entre ψυχή et νοῦς*]. The exact relationship between the two in [Origen’s] mind is not easy to work out, but the basic idea is that the spirit becomes soul as it voluntarily sets itself apart from God and the soul is transformed into spirit by being cleansed in the material world, its place of purification, and by return to God. But the terminology of Origen is not entirely clear. Often spirit and soul mean the same thing, so that they appear, especially in his ascetical writings, to be two aspects of man set over against each other.<sup>8</sup>

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5. See Rahner, “The ‘Spiritual Senses’ according to Origen,” 84.

6. Rahner, “Le début d’une doctrine,” 32; “The ‘Spiritual Senses’ according to Origen,” 88.

7. See Rahner, “The ‘Spiritual Senses’ according to Origen,” 88.

8. Rahner, “Le début d’une doctrine,” 32; “The ‘Spiritual Senses’ according to Origen,” 88.

In this context, “soul” and “spirit” are not two separate substances but two ways of referring to the same human subject—one who, while existing materially in the world, is nevertheless capable of genuine spiritual experience. Although Origen does not consistently distinguish between these terms and often uses them interchangeably, Rahner discerns a meaningful spiritual dynamic in his thought: when the human person turns away from God and becomes entangled in worldly concerns, the spirit becomes soul; but when the person returns to God through purification in the world, the soul becomes spirit again—that which properly belongs to the knowledge of the divine. This reveals that, even though Origen does not assign particular importance to the physical senses in his spirituality, concrete human experience in the material world remains the site where spiritual purification and transformation occur.<sup>9</sup> For Rahner’s Origen, then, soul and spirit do not denote two distinct parts of the person, but rather two ways of describing the same human subject at different stages along the spiritual journey towards God.

### 1.1.2. Praxis and Theory: From Moral Action to Contemplation

Rahner highlights a crucial distinction in Origen’s account of the spiritual senses: the difference between the active life, which he terms “praxis” (*τὸ πρακτικόν*), and the contemplative life, which he calls “theory” (*τὸ θεωρητικόν*). These two modes correspond to foundational stages in the human person’s spiritual development, which Rahner describes as a progression from soul to spirit, from “practical life” (*ὁ πρακτικὸς βίος*) to “contemplative life” (*ὁ θεωρητικὸς βίος*).<sup>10</sup> As noted earlier, although Origen often uses “soul” and “spirit”

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9. Rahner’s interpretation is based on his conviction that, in Origen, spiritual or mystical experiences cannot be separated from the lived experiences of human beings in the world. He states: “if religious, and especially mystical, experience seeks to express the inexpressible despite all the obstacles that lie in the way, then inevitably it must go back to images which come from the realm of sense knowledge [*expressions empruntées à la connaissance sensible*]” (Rahner, “Le début d’une doctrine,” 16; “The ‘Spiritual Senses’ according to Origen,” 81).

10. See Rahner, “Le début d’une doctrine,” 36; “The ‘Spiritual Senses’ according to Origen,” 90.

interchangeably, Rahner maintains that he also contrasts them: the soul is marked by two dangerous tendencies (aggression and desire) which manifest in the human person as moral passions and errors that must be overcome.<sup>11</sup> By contrast, the spirit represents the positive *telos* to be sought: virtue, right conduct, observance of God's law (righteousness), and ultimately, knowledge of God.<sup>12</sup> Thus, the goal of mystical experience or the spiritual life is to advance from soul to spirit; from disorder and moral struggle to union with God in contemplative knowledge and love.

The movement from soul to spirit reflects the progression from praxis to theory—from the active life to the contemplative life. For Origen, as Rahner interprets him, the goal of mystical experience is for the soul to advance through moral purification in the world and arrive at the state of “spirit,” where the spiritual senses are fully awakened in the knowledge and love of God.<sup>13</sup> In Rahner's reading of Origen, this transformation entails a process of purification in which the human person, as spirit, is gradually freed from the passions and errors associated with the soul.<sup>14</sup> At the summit of this process, the person reaches a state of “indifference” (*l'impassibilité*) or “apathy” (*ἀπάθεια*)—a form of spiritual freedom marked by an interior openness to God and grounded in the virtues of love and purity.<sup>15</sup>

According to Rahner, Origen regards the contemplative life (*theorie*) as superior to

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11. See Rahner, “The ‘Spiritual Senses’ according to Origen,” 91.

12. See Rahner, “The ‘Spiritual Senses’ according to Origen,” 90–91. Nevertheless, it is clear that Origen does not separate “soul” from “spirit,” the active life from the contemplative life, or praxis from theory in a strict or dualistic manner. For Origen, in Rahner's interpretation, the soul and the spirit remain united in mystical experience. He acknowledges that even the ordinary Christian, engaged in the active life of spiritual purification, can attain some degree of divine knowledge—such as insight into the mystery of the Trinity—which properly belongs to the contemplative life. Thus, Origen views the contemplative and active lives as intrinsically connected, and even recognises potential dangers or limitations within the contemplative life itself, suggesting that it is not necessarily the superior form of Christian life in every respect (see Rahner, “The ‘Spiritual Senses’ according to Origen,” 92).

13. See Rahner, “The ‘Spiritual Senses’ according to Origen,” 91.

14. See Rahner, “The ‘Spiritual Senses’ according to Origen,” 90.

15. Rahner, “Le début d'une doctrine,” 38; “The ‘Spiritual Senses’ according to Origen,” 90–91.

the active life (*praxis*). For Origen, as Rahner reads him, the ultimate goal of the active life is spiritual knowledge—a reality that can be fully realized only in contemplation.<sup>16</sup> The active life thus serves primarily as a necessary preparation for contemplation, involving the moral purification that renders the soul receptive to divine truth. This progression underscores Origen’s clear preference for the contemplative life, which he sees as the true fulfilment of the spiritual senses and the highest expression of mystical union with God:

The realm of the ‘spirit’ is ‘theory’ [*theorie*] and the essence of the contemplative life is precisely ‘spiritual knowledge’, a bread, in Origen’s words, ‘which contains what is hidden and makes clear faith in God and knowledge of the things of God’, and stands therefore in direct contrast to the normal bread of the observance of divine commands. The obstacle to be overcome here is the ‘spirit’s’ absence of knowledge. Without hesitation Origen stresses the priority of contemplative over the active life and values the latter merely as a preparation for the former.<sup>17</sup>

In Rahner’s reading of Origen, the essence of the human person, as spirit, is contemplation (*theorie*), understood as a profound interior knowledge of God—metaphorically described as the “bread” that reveals hidden things and nourishes faith. This spiritual knowledge surpasses the “ordinary bread” of moral purification (*praxis*), indicating that divine knowledge is not merely a by-product of mystical experience but its ultimate goal and fulfilment.

Rahner’s reading of Origen frames the contemplative life not simply as the summit of the spiritual journey but as the fullest realization of the human person as spirit. Yet this ascent is never a flight from the material dimension of existence. The active life of moral purification, grounded in concrete human action and the overcoming of passions, is the indispensable foundation upon which contemplation rests. In Rahner’s view, the movement from *praxis* to *theorie* shows that spiritual and mystical experience is inseparably bound to

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16. To substantiate, Rahner cites *Origen’s Exegetica in Psalmos*, as found in Paul Migne’s *Patrologia Graeca* (PG 12, 1652C): “practical men have their place in the forecourts of the house of the Lord, while men of theory dwell in the house itself” (see Rahner, “The ‘Spiritual Senses’ according to Origen,” 91).

17. Rahner, “The ‘Spiritual Senses’ according to Origen,” 91–92.

the embodied conditions of human life. The material world remains the place in which the spiritual senses are purified and awakened, and in which the knowledge and love of God are ultimately received.

## 1.2. The “Spiritual Senses” in Bonaventure

Rahner’s 1933 study, “La doctrine des ‘sens spirituels’ au Moyen Âge en particulier chez Saint Bonaventure,” presents his interpretation of St. Bonaventure’s doctrine of the spiritual senses.<sup>18</sup> He presents the spiritual senses in Bonaventure as concrete acts of intellect and will through which the soul, in a state of grace, attains mystical union with God.<sup>19</sup> This discussion will address two central themes: (1) the significance of the intellect and will in Bonaventure’s conception of the spiritual senses, and (2) the relationship between ecstatic love (*amor ecstaticus*), rapture (*raptus*), and the apex of affection (*apex affectus*) in understanding the spiritual senses in Bonaventure.

### 1.2.1. Intellect, Will, and the Theological Virtues

Rahner examines Bonaventure’s doctrine of the spiritual senses by tracing its development from early Christian thought into the Middle Ages.<sup>20</sup> Bonaventure’s contribution stands out in the medieval period. Unlike earlier scholastics who treated the spiritual senses within an abstract psychological or allegorical framework, Bonaventure understood them as concrete human acts of intellect and will, perfected through three

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18. See Karl Rahner, “La doctrine des ‘sens spirituels’ au Moyen-Âge: En particulier chez saint Bonaventure,” in *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 1, *Frühe spirituelle Texte und Studien: Grundlagen im Orden*, ed. Karl Kardinal Lehmann and Albert Raffelt (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2014), 82–146; “The Doctrine of the ‘Spiritual Senses’ in the Middle Ages,” in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 16, *Experience of the Spirit: Source of Theology*, trans. David Morland (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), 104–34.

19. Rahner understands the “soul” in his interpretation of Bonaventure’s spiritual senses as the total concrete human subject in the world. It is not an abstract spiritual principle in the human person but a word used to describe the concrete human person (“man”) as a spiritual being in the world (see Rahner, “The Doctrine of the ‘Spiritual Senses’,” 111).

20. For further discussion, see Rahner, “The Doctrine of the ‘Spiritual Senses’,” 104–09.

operations of the soul—the virtues, the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and the blessings of the beatitudes.<sup>21</sup> For Bonaventure, as Rahner interprets him, the soul in a state of grace functions within these three modes, which in turn enable the powers of the soul to be “corrected” (*habitus virtutum, potentiae rectificantur*), to “develop and become stronger” (*habitus donorum, potentiae expediuntur*), and finally to be “brought to the perfection which a man can achieve on earth”.<sup>22</sup>

In Rahner’s reading of Bonaventure, the three modes of operation are always and already present in the soul in a state of grace and correspond to three stages of the spiritual life: purification, enlightenment, and perfection. These stages are not static conditions of the soul, but dynamic movements within the life of the human person: spiritual practices carried out in wisdom and love that enable the person to attain “profound peace”—described by Bonaventure as “the sevenfold gifts of the blessings of beatitude.”<sup>23</sup> This peace, in turn, gives rise to spiritual joy, which Bonaventure, in Rahner’s view, understands as the fruits of the Holy Spirit, manifested as acts of the spiritual senses:

Although these three modes of operation are already present in the soul in a state of grace, they do not have their full effect at the same moment; rather each of them corresponds to one of the three stages of the spiritual life: beginning [*purification*], development [*illumination*] and perfection [*perfectionnement*]. The perfect man enjoys the sevenfold gifts of the blessings of beatitude and reaches the state of profound peace. ... When the soul has acquired such peace, then it experiences of necessity spiritual joy, the fruits of the Holy Spirit. At this point a man is on the threshold of contemplation, which is exercised precisely in the acts of the spiritual senses.<sup>24</sup>

Rahner demonstrates that, for Bonaventure, virtue plays a central role in the spiritual journey

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21. See Rahner, “The Doctrine of the ‘Spiritual Senses’,” 110.

22. Rahner, “La doctrine des ‘sens spirituels,’” 96; “The Doctrine of the ‘Spiritual Senses,’” 111.

23. Rahner, “The Doctrine of the ‘Spiritual Senses,’” 111.

24. Rahner, “La doctrine des ‘sens spirituels,’” 96; “The Doctrine of the ‘Spiritual Senses,’” 111.

towards God. The three stages of the spiritual life (purification, enlightenment, and perfection) are not merely abstract concepts but emerge from concrete human actions shaped by wisdom and love.<sup>25</sup> These stages unfold progressively: beginning with moral purification, deepening into spiritual insight and discernment, and culminating in a perfect state of interior peace and joy. When this peace is fully realized, the perfected soul, that is, the human person transformed by grace, enters into authentic spiritual joy, which Bonaventure identifies as the fruits of the Holy Spirit or acts of the spiritual senses.

Rahner identifies the operations of the intellect and will as foundational to Bonaventure's theology of the spiritual senses.<sup>26</sup> Sight and hearing, he observes, are more closely aligned with the intellect, whereas taste, smell, and touch are directed towards the will.<sup>27</sup> Although Rahner does not offer a formal definition of intellect and will within Bonaventure's system, he associates them with the theological virtues: faith pertains to the intellect, while hope and love are acts of the will:

Spiritual sight and hearing [*la vue et l'ouïe spirituelle*] are closely associated to the intellect; taste, smell and touch relate rather to the will. This also determines the way they are connected to the theological virtues. Thus faith is first of all rooted in the intellect; from faith proceed spiritual sight and hearing as soon as the corresponding operation of gifts and blessings have their effect. Hope, and especially love, are rooted in the will, from which the spiritual sense of smell and the higher senses, the taste and touch of love, proceed.<sup>28</sup>

The spiritual senses are not speculative faculties of the soul, but concrete acts of virtue rooted in the human person. Although Rahner does not provide a formal definition of these faculties, he underscores their practical orientation. In doing so, he emphasizes that the spiritual senses

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25. For further discussion of Rahner's views on the experience of God's love as reflected in concrete human actions, see Florent Gaboriau, *Le tournant théologique aujourd'hui selon K. Rahner* (Paris: Desclée, 1968), 55–64.

26. See Rahner, "The Doctrine of the 'Spiritual Senses'," 112.

27. See Rahner, "The Doctrine of the 'Spiritual Senses'," 112–13.

28. Rahner, "La doctrine des 'sens spirituels,'" 100; "The Doctrine of the 'Spiritual Senses'," 112–13.

are not pious abstractions but concrete expressions of the whole human person's engagement with God—arising from the soul as the living centre of the practice of faith, hope, and love. Accordingly, the operations of both intellect and will are understood as practical and existential acts grounded in the essential structure of the soul, and therefore inherently embodied in the lived experience of the human person.

### 1.2.2. Ecstatic Love, Rapture, and the Apex of Affection

To show that the spiritual senses in Bonaventure properly belong to the operations of the soul, Rahner draws an important distinction between “ecstatic love” (*amor ecstaticus*) and “rapture” (*raptus*). *Amor ecstaticus* refers to a direct and unmediated experience of God, not through intellectual apprehension of divine truths, but through an ontological union with God effected by a loving act of the will.<sup>29</sup> This form of love leads to an intimate and transformative union with God that extends beyond all mediated or conceptual knowledge.<sup>30</sup> In contrast, *raptus* signifies a more extraordinary form of mystical experience that remains mediated—either through conceptual knowledge or through the created effects of grace. It is an extraordinary, intellectual event—a “direct, clear vision of God through the intellect,” akin to a graced foretaste of the beatific vision (*visio beatifica*), which is typically a privileged experience of only a few individuals in this life.<sup>31</sup> *Raptus* is, in essence, more mediated through grace and less immediately experienced than *amor ecstaticus*. By emphasising this distinction, Rahner places *amor ecstaticus* above *raptus* in his reading of the spiritual senses in Bonaventure. The spiritual senses—particularly at their highest level—are rooted not in esoteric mystical insight, but in the concrete, affective will of the human person, in the state

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29. See Rahner, “The Doctrine of the ‘Spiritual Senses’,” 117.

30. See Rahner, “The Doctrine of the ‘Spiritual Senses’,” 117.

31. See Rahner, “The Doctrine of the ‘Spiritual Senses’,” 117–18.

of grace, responding tangibly to God's love.<sup>32</sup> He writes:

Ecstasy [*L'extase*] ... is to be sharply distinguished from intellectual experience ... even of a mystical kind, since it is the direct experience of God, direct in the proper ontological sense, and not only in the sense that the experience of the created effects of grace (which are, therefore, recognized) allows a practically direct knowledge of God as their underlying cause (in the form of a 'medium in quo') ... It is not hard ... to understand the connection between knowledge of God, 'unio' and ecstatic love: ecstatic love (an act of the will) effects union with God, which permits an experience of God that surpasses any in which God is perceived in the created operations of grace. The experience of God contained in 'intima unio' is not 'raptus' ... Furthermore ... ecstasy is described as 'amor ecstaticus' [*l'amour extatique*] ... plainly distinguished from 'raptus' ... a form of knowledge of God which is mediated by the created operation of grace.<sup>33</sup>

While *raptus* represents a form of mystical knowledge that involves a rarefied mediation of God through the intellectual cognition of the created effects of grace (*cognoscere in effectu gratiae*), ecstasy, by contrast, refers to a direct and unmediated experience of God. This experience is not mediated through the intellect but occurs through *amor ecstaticus*—a loving act of the will—which brings about, in the human person, an intimate and transformative union with God that transcends all conceptual or mediated forms of knowledge.

Rahner turns to the notion of the "apex of affection" (*apex affectus*) in Bonaventure to illustrate how this transformative union with God is realized. The *apex affectus* signifies a profound experience of God's love, one that surpasses all intellectual concepts or cognitive knowledge. It is "the direct spiritual union with God in the highest point of the soul," a union in which "every activity of the intellect as such is excluded."<sup>34</sup> This is not an act of knowing, but a deep, intimate act of loving, arising from the innermost depth of the human person,

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32. Cf. Harvey D. Egan, *Karl Rahner: Mystic of Everyday Life* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1998), 57–59. Egan (b. 1937) argues that for Rahner, spiritual and mystical experiences are not extraordinary, supernatural events detached from daily human life; rather, they unfold precisely within the ordinariness of everyday existence, which serves as the concrete locus of a graced encounter between the human and the divine.

33. Rahner, "La doctrine des 'sens spirituels,'" 110; "The Doctrine of the 'Spiritual Senses,'" 118–19.

34. See Rahner, "The Doctrine of the 'Spiritual Senses,'" 123.

beyond the grasp of discursive or conceptual thought.<sup>35</sup> For Bonaventure, the entire mystical journey culminates in this affective union: God is not encountered through abstract speculation, but in the most personal and interior dimension of the soul. Hence, to see, touch, taste, hear, or smell the divine through the spiritual senses, one must turn inward—not by means of rational reflection, but through an affectionate experience of God’s concrete love. Thus, mystical encounter does not remove the person from the real world; rather, it is precisely in the concrete reality of human existence in the world that the soul’s hidden centre becomes the privileged locus of the ecstatic experience of God’s love:

A man may, however, enter the innermost part of his spirit through ecstatic union and here he reaches the highest point of his soul. The whole mystical enterprise up to this point was nothing other than the gradual return of a man to the interior domain, as ascent to the highest point of the soul. Because this can only be reached in ‘affectivity’, a man must leave behind him all intellectual activity at a certain point on his mystical path on this earth. ... The truth is rather that ecstasy does not involve the intellect at all. This explains why mystical union is an entry into darkness, into a divine obscurity. This ‘night’ and the exclusion of the intellect are essential to ecstasy ... the direct union of love with God.<sup>36</sup>

Ecstasy, then, is not an act of the intellect but a profound experience of affective love. The *apex affectus* marks the innermost core of the human person, where all intellectual striving is transcended and the soul encounters God directly as pure love. In this union, the spiritual senses reach their fullest realization—not through conceptual reasoning or discursive knowledge, but through an interior act of love that binds the soul to God.<sup>37</sup> Crucially, this union takes place within the concrete and imperfect conditions of earthly life, and it remains a genuinely human act, grounded in the deepest affective centre of the person: the soul.

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35. See Rahner, “The Doctrine of the ‘Spiritual Senses,’” 123.

36. Rahner, “La doctrine des ‘sens spirituels,’” 120, 122; “The Doctrine of the ‘Spiritual Senses,’” 123.

37. Cf. Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, trans. Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 1957; repr., 1961 and 1973), 30–31. Lossky (1903–1958) interprets mystical ecstasy in the Eastern Church not as an intellectual act but as an embodied union in which the human person is wholly at one with God, such that dualism disappears and the distinction between subject and object no longer exists.

Mystical union, therefore, does not consist in grasping or comprehending God intellectually, but in entering into the divine obscurity, what Rahner calls the “darkness” of God’s incomprehensibility, where love alone guides the soul into perfect union with God in mystical experience.<sup>38</sup>

Rahner poses a central question in interpreting Bonaventure’s view of the spiritual senses: how can this direct experience of a union of love occur apart from an intellectual knowledge of God? In other words, if, according to Bonaventure, union with God must be experienced in a direct and immediate way, how can such union be articulated without relying on an intellectual knowledge of God?<sup>39</sup> He addresses this question by affirming that, for Bonaventure, God always remains a hidden and obscure subject in mystical union—the “dark fire of love.”<sup>40</sup> It is not the soul that finds God in its innermost part, but God who reveals Godself in the soul.<sup>41</sup> The will, which properly belongs to the operations of the soul, is not, strictly speaking, the initiator of the soul’s union with God, but the receiver of God’s love already disclosed in the *apex affectus*. Thus, in mystical union, it is God who finds the human person, not the other way around. God is the ground of the human soul and touches the innermost core of the person as love—in ways that are known through the spiritual senses but cannot be exhaustively described by the intellect. Rahner writes:

Bonaventure ... did not explicitly address himself to this problem [how the soul experiences God directly in mystical union], but he could have offered the following reflections which would fit in with his basic line of argument. In every act of will and of love the object is not already grasped by the will in virtue of its intentional presence to the intellect; rather it must enter the will on its own account. ... Now if God touches this deepest point from within, giving form to it, as it were, then the ‘apex affectus’ will become conscious of this direct union of love without the intellect taking any active part.<sup>42</sup>

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38. See Rahner, “The Doctrine of the ‘Spiritual Senses’,” 123–24.

39. See Rahner, “The Doctrine of the ‘Spiritual Senses’,” 123–24.

40. See Rahner, “The Doctrine of the ‘Spiritual Senses’,” 125.

41. See Rahner, “The Doctrine of the ‘Spiritual Senses’,” 125.

42. Rahner, “La doctrine des ‘sens spirituels,’” 124; “The Doctrine of the ‘Spiritual Senses’,” 124–25.

For Rahner, mystical union is not initiated by the human person but by God, who remains hidden and yet intimately present at the deepest point of the soul. While the soul's will—as part of its active spiritual life—receives this union in love, it does not cause or grasp it by its own intellectual powers.<sup>43</sup> The union is affective, not intellectual—an act of love whereby the *apex affectus* in the soul is “transformed” into God, in a way that surpasses all conceptual understanding:

The direct ecstatic union of love is realized without the assistance of the intellect; therefore the reality of God's own essence must be the ‘informing object’ of the will (more precisely of the ‘affections’) in its innermost being. For in ecstasy the ‘apex affectus’ is ‘transformed’ completely into God.<sup>44</sup>

Mystical experience is not the “soul” finding God, but God finding the “soul,” awakening it from within—not merely speculatively, but through a concrete affective experience of God's love in the real world.<sup>45</sup>

### 1.3. The “Supernatural” in Clement of Alexandria

In his 1937 essay, Rahner explores Clement of Alexandria's use of the term *ὑπερκόσμιος* (“supermundane” or “beyond the cosmic order”), arguing that it anticipates the modern theological concept of the “supernatural” in the doctrine of grace.<sup>46</sup> Situating his analysis

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43. This does not mean that the intellect is less important than the soul in mystical union. On the contrary, the intellect is important for articulating mystical experience in a way that can be understood and meaningfully practiced. As Rahner puts it, “the soul experiences God directly in the ground of its being only as the motive power of ecstatic love which leaves all knowledge behind it, and in consequence the experience remains obscure until the intellect as well is flooded, without being blinded, by the dazzling brilliance of God” (Rahner, “The Doctrine of the ‘Spiritual Senses’,” 125). Thus, inasmuch as the intellect does not initiate mystical experience, it is nevertheless necessary for articulating this experience, albeit in an imperfect way.

44. See Rahner, “The Doctrine of the ‘Spiritual Senses’,” 124–25.

45. As Rahner puts it, “His [Bonaventure's] partial success makes one able to assert that the doctrine of the five spiritual senses is not merely a period piece, a speculative *a priori* game which has no contact with the real world.” See Rahner, “The Doctrine of the ‘Spiritual Senses’,” 127.

46. See Karl Rahner, “De termino aliquo in theologia Clementis Alexandrini, qui aequivalet nostro conceptui entis ‘supernaturalis’,” *Gregorianum* 18 (1937): 426–31, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23567562>. See also Karl Rahner, “De termino aliquo in theologia Clementis Alexandrini, qui aequivalet nostro conceptui entis ‘supernaturalis’,” in *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 5/1, *De Gratia Christi: Schriften zur Gnadenlehre*, ed. Roman A.

within the wider context of early Christian and Gnostic thought, Rahner emphasizes that Clement's *ὑπερκόσμιος* reflects an early Christian understanding of grace as affirming not a rupture but a unity between the natural and the supernatural orders. This analysis will discuss two relevant issues: (1) the relationship between nature and grace as articulated in Clement's confrontation with the Gnostics, and (2) the notion of the "supernatural state" within Clement's broader anthropological vision.

### 1.3.1. Nature and Grace: Clement's Response to Gnostic Dualism

Rahner frames this discussion within the second- and third-century development of the theology of grace, particularly in early Christian engagements with Gnostic thought.<sup>47</sup> In response to the common assumption that significant theological debates on grace began only with Augustine, he argues that such discussions were already underway in the early centuries of Christianity. As an example, he points to Clement of Alexandria, who employs the term *ὑπερκόσμιος*—a term that Rahner interprets as functionally equivalent to the modern concept of the "supernatural" (*ultra naturam*) in relation to grace, as distinct from the "natural" (*naturam*) in relation to nature.<sup>48</sup>

Clement's use of the term *ὑπερκόσμιος* is noteworthy because it shows that the relationship between the natural and the supernatural was already a subject of theological reflection in early Christianity. According to Rahner, the term *ὑπερκόσμιος* does not appear in the New Testament, nor is it found in the writings of the Apostolic Fathers or the

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Siebenrock and Albert Raffelt, with Theodor Schneider (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2015), 3–13.

47. See Rahner, "De termino," 426–27.

48. See Rahner, "De termino," 427. This terminological parallel that Rahner draws between *ὑπερκόσμιος* and the "supernatural" reveals an early Christian awareness of the distinction between nature and grace. It affirms that theological reflection on grace—beyond what is found in Sacred Scripture and long before its systematic development in the high scholasticism of the medieval period—was already present in the pre-Augustinian tradition.

Apologists of the second century.<sup>49</sup> This suggests that Clement is the first Christian writer to employ the term in a distinctly theological sense.<sup>50</sup> Drawing from *Stromata* (Book VII, 3, 18, 2), Rahner observes that Clement describes the perfected Christian as one who has “become both ‘of the world’ and ‘beyond the world’ [γενόμενος κόσμος καὶ ὑπερκόσμος].”<sup>51</sup> Although Clement does not directly explain the meaning of *ὑπερκόσμος* in this text, his theology expresses a vision of Christian life that holds the natural and the supernatural, the material and the spiritual, nature and grace, in unity.

Rahner’s reading of Clement’s theology of grace shows that, even in the early centuries, Christian thought resisted Gnostic tendencies to sever the spiritual from the material. By affirming that the perfected believer is both “of the world” and “beyond the world,” Clement rejects any dualism that would devalue the created order in favour of a purely disembodied spirituality. Nature and grace are not opposing realms, but distinct dimensions held in unity within the concrete reality of human existence. In this way, Clement’s *ὑπερκόσμος* vision anticipates Rahner’s own conviction that the supernatural does not abolish the natural but brings it to fulfilment—so that the material dimension of human life remains the indispensable sphere where divine grace is received, known, and lived.

### 1.3.2. “Mundane” and “Supermundane”: The Supernatural as Graced Elevation

For Rahner, Clement’s account of the relationship between the natural and the supernatural deliberately counters the dualism characteristic of much Gnostic thought, which

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49. See Rahner, “De termino,” 427–28.

50. The term *ὑπερκόσμος* was already found in the writings of the Gnostic Basilides, from whom Clement of Alexandria appears to have borrowed it, reinterpreting it within a distinctly Christian theological framework. The term appears seven times in the writings of Clement. Whether, and in what sense, the word was already used by Greek authors prior to Christianity is not Rahner’s concern, since it would not have carried the same theological meaning that Clement applies to it in his own thought (see Rahner, “De termino,” 427–28.)

51. Rahner, “De termino,” 428.

frequently casts the material world and the human body as the antithesis of spiritual life.<sup>52</sup>

The Gnostics, particularly those influenced by Basilides, understood grace primarily in terms of *ἐκλογή* (election).<sup>53</sup> For them, grace was entirely supermundane in nature, such that anything in the world and outside this divine order of election was to be rejected, avoided, or condemned. Consequently, those who did not participate in this supermundane order of grace were not considered among the elect; they did not belong to the supreme God and were therefore excluded from salvation.<sup>54</sup> In the system of Basilides, as Rahner reads it, grace must be distinguished from nature to the extent that worldly realities are seen as offensive to grace, irreconcilable with it, and ultimately hostile to it.<sup>55</sup>

Rahner argues that Clement of Alexandria redefines *ὑπερκόσμιος* in a way that entirely departs from this Gnostic usage, giving it a new theological meaning. In Rahner's reading, Clement uses the term to articulate a Christian anthropology in which the true believer's existence is simultaneously *mundanus* (material or worldly) and *supermundanus* (spiritual or super-worldly).<sup>56</sup> This perspective affirms that the material dimension of human existence is not devoid of spiritual value. On the contrary, Clement insists that the perfected Christian must be both *κόσμιος* and *ὑπερκόσμιος*, expressing the conviction that the world is not alien to grace, and that grace is not alien to the world.<sup>57</sup> In this view, *ὑπερκόσμιος* refers not to a rejection of the world but to its supernatural elevation and transformation by grace.

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52. Cf. Lisa Isherwood and Elizabeth Stuart, eds., *Introducing Body Theology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 64–77. As Isherwood observes, from early Gnostic Christianity through the post-Enlightenment period there has been a persistent tendency within certain theological traditions to construe the human body as the antithesis of perfection and as an obstacle to encountering the divine in mystical experience. For a critical examination of this historical trajectory.

53. See Rahner, "De termino," 428.

54. See Rahner, "De termino," 428–29.

55. See Rahner, "De termino," 429.

56. See Rahner, "De termino," 429.

57. See Rahner, "De termino," 429.

The life of the “true Gnostic” is thus one in which ordinary human experiences become concrete participations in divine grace.

For Rahner, Clement’s insistence that the true Gnostic be both *κόσμιος* and *ὑπερκόσμιος* entails two key theological moves. First, Clement is distinguishing between “nature” and a certain “supernature,” affirming that *κόσμιος* and *ὑπερκόσμιος* cannot mean the same thing. Second, he is asserting that this *ὑπερκόσμιος* is not innate to the human being but is gratuitous, a divine gift to human nature that supernaturally elevates it towards God.<sup>58</sup> In this way, the term *ὑπερκόσμιος*, in Rahner’s reading of Clement, corresponds precisely to the modern theological understanding of the “supernatural,” as used in the doctrine of grace.<sup>59</sup> The supernatural, in this sense, is not a separate or self-contained order but the natural or created order as already existing within, and transformed by, divine life itself.<sup>60</sup>

Rahner’s interpretation of Clement’s redefinition of *ὑπερκόσμιος* thus affirms that the supernatural is not an escape from the world but the graced elevation of the world itself. By holding *κόσμιος* and *ὑπερκόσμιος* in inseparable unity, Clement, in Rahner’s view, resists any theology that would denigrate material existence as devoid of grace. Instead, the believer’s life in the world becomes the very arena in which divine life is received and manifested. This perspective anticipates Rahner’s own theological insistence that grace does not bypass the material condition of human life but transforms it from within—so that the knowledge and love of God are always mediated through the concrete realities of worldly existence.

#### 1.4. The “Everyday Mysticism” of Ignatius

In “Betrachtungen zum ignatianischen Exerzitienbuch” (1965), Rahner explores Ignatian

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58. See Rahner, “De termino,” 429–30.

59. See Rahner, “De termino,” 430.

60. See Rahner, “De termino,” 430.

spirituality as a pathway to encountering God within the concrete realities of daily life.<sup>61</sup>

Rejecting abstract approaches to mystical experience, he presents the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius (1491–1556) as a dynamic and transformative spiritual journey towards God, grounded in everyday life experiences. This analysis will discuss the following: (1) human experience as the ground of the *Exercises* and (2) discipleship and the mysticism of everyday life.

#### 1.4.1. Human Experience as the Ground of the Spiritual Exercises

Rahner views the Spiritual Exercises as rooted in the concrete realities of human life, where faith is expressed through decisive, lived choices before God.<sup>62</sup> He emphasizes that the Exercises are not abstract theological reflections or scholarly meditations, but a concrete existential election—a choice in which exercitants place their entire self, in freedom and honesty, before God.<sup>63</sup> He explains that the decisions required of the retreatant or exercitant

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61. See Karl Rahner, “Betrachtungen zum ignatianischen Exerzitienbuch,” in *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 13, *Ignatianischer Geist: Schriften zu den Exerzitien und zur Spiritualität des Ordensgründers*, edited by Andreas R. Batlogg, Johannes Herzgsell, and Stefan Kiechle (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2006), 37–265; English translation: Karl Rahner, *Spiritual Exercises* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1967).

62. Ignatian spirituality had the most profound influence on Rahner. He admitted: “But I think that the spirituality of Ignatius himself, which one learned through the practice of prayer and religious formation, was more significant for me than all philosophical and theological erudition.” (Paul Imhof and Hubert Biallowons, eds., *Karl Rahner in Dialogue: Conversations and Interviews 1965–1982*, English trans. ed. Harvey D. Egan [New York: Crossroad, 1986], 191). See also Roman A. Siebenrock, “Gratia Christi: The Heart of the Theology of Karl Rahner: Ignatian Influences in the Codex *De Gratia Christi* (1937/38) and Its Significance for the Development of His Work,” *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia* 63, no. 4 (2007): 1261. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40338257>.

63. See Rahner, *Spiritual Exercises*, 12–13. Cf. Philip Endean, *Karl Rahner and Ignatian Spirituality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 6–7. According to Endean, the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius are a deeply transformative journey of meditations, prayers, and reflections crafted to deepen one’s relationship with God and discern His specific will in one’s life. These Exercises embody not only the personal mysticism and spirituality of Ignatius but also his commitment to pastoral care, offering a structured path for spiritual growth and discernment. Divided into four “weeks” or stages, the Exercises guide participants through important themes: self-examination, reflection on the life and teachings of Jesus, contemplation on His Passion, and a celebration of His Resurrection. Each stage is intended to cultivate personal transformation and spiritual alignment with God’s purpose. Participants are encouraged to develop virtues such as humility, repentance, love, and hope. Key practices within the Exercises, like discernment, invite individuals to understand the movements of their soul, helping them to distinguish God’s guidance. Another essential practice, the Examen, is a daily prayer aimed at recognising God’s presence in the ordinary rhythms of daily life, responding to the “signs of the times.”

who practises the Exercises engage directly with the concrete realities of life, including both its joys and its challenges. Unlike a purely spiritual or intellectual act, these decisions involve the whole person and extend to all dimensions of ordinary daily life.<sup>64</sup> The Christian concept of God presented in the Spiritual Exercises is essentially a “practical” one, demanding a decisive choice for or against God—one that can only be fully understood through involvement with concrete human experience in the world. Rahner writes:

The Christian concept of God that interests us here [in the Spiritual Exercises] is essentially ‘practical.’ It demands a decision either for or against God, and is itself only attainable in decision. It is a turning to the living God ... The demands of this ‘turning’ apply to us believers also, at least insofar as we have to suffer through the godlessness of the world. The affliction of all Christian confession of God is especially tangible at that point where we are supposed to find God in the dark bitterness of the world and in the obscurity of the future, while addressing Him as ‘Father’ with a feeling of security against all insecurity.<sup>65</sup>

The Christian understanding of God in the Spiritual Exercises is not abstract or theoretical, but deeply practical and tangible. It calls for a personal and existential decision for or against God—one that can only be truly made in the act of choosing: in a concrete turning towards or away from the living God. For Christian believers, the choice for God must be made even amid the godlessness, suffering, and uncertainty of the world.

At the heart of the Spiritual Exercises lies the meditation on the “enfleshment of God” (*Die Menschwerdung Gottes*), which Rahner sees as pivotal for transforming the retreatant’s understanding of God from abstract knowledge to a personal encounter.<sup>66</sup> Placed within the second week of the Exercises, Rahner emphasizes that a serious meditation on Christ’s humanity, the Word of God made “flesh,” can profoundly affect the retreatant by shifting

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64. See Avery Dulles, “The Ignatian Experience as Reflected in the Spiritual Theology of Karl Rahner,” *Philippine Studies* 13, no. 3 (1965): 471–72, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42720036>

65. Rahner, *Spiritual Exercises*, 15.

66. For further discussion, see Rahner, “Betrachtungen,” 102–16; Rahner, *Spiritual Exercises*, 97–113.

their perception of God from an abstract concept to an existential and personal election.<sup>67</sup> This suggests that the mystery of the Incarnation serves as a starting point for an honest reflection on the nature of God itself. According to Rahner, the Incarnation is a vital bridge between the divine and the human.<sup>68</sup> In becoming human, God chose to enter fully into space and time, revealing not only something about God's nature but also affirming the concrete dimension of human existence in the world as the locus of God's own dwelling. In this view, human embodiment is no longer simply the context for salvation—it is the very reality that God has assumed in the person of Jesus Christ. Rahner writes:

For if it is essential to the Word of God that He and He alone is the one who begins and can begin a human history, provided that God wants to assimilate the world to Himself in such a way that this world is not only His product that is quite removed from Him but becomes His own reality (as His assimilated 'nature' and 'surrounding world' that is necessarily given with a nature), then it could be that we only understand what the Incarnation is when we know what the Word of God is, and that we only properly understand what the Word of God is when we know what the Incarnation is. ... The Word of God became man [*Gottes Wort ist Mensch geworden*]. What does it mean to say: 'He became man?' We are not asking here what it means to say that this Word became something. We are looking at what He became. Man!<sup>69</sup>

The Incarnation is not merely a divine action that takes place within human history, but a transformation of history itself, as God assumes human nature and makes the world God's own reality. In becoming human, the Word of God does not simply enter a distant or external creation; rather, it takes it up into divine life, revealing that human existence—what we live, experience, and recognise from within and without—is what God has truly become:

Man is what we are; it is what we experience every day [*was wir täglich leben*], what has been experienced millions of times in the history to which we belong, what we know from within ourselves and what we know from the outside—from our surrounding world. ... The Word of God assumed an individual human 'nature' and thus became man.<sup>70</sup>

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67. See Rahner, *Spiritual Exercises*, 97–98.

68. See Rahner, *Spiritual Exercises*, 99.

69. Rahner, "Betrachtungen," 103–04; *Spiritual Exercises*, 99.

70. Rahner, "Betrachtungen," 103; *Spiritual Exercises*, 99.

Accordingly, the Incarnation reveals the world as the sphere into which God enters and humanity as the reality God has assumed and now shares. For Rahner, if we are to understand the Incarnation accurately, we must grasp both who the Word is and what that Word has truly become: a human person.<sup>71</sup>

Rahner interprets human nature through the lens of the Incarnation, stressing the significance of the Word of God's assumption of an individual human nature. For him, the Incarnation reveals what human beings truly are: "spirits" in the world.<sup>72</sup> Here, "spirit" is not an abstract essence but signifies the intrinsic human openness to the infinite mystery of God—the origin and goal of human existence. To be human, then, is to abandon or "give away" oneself completely into the mystery of God's incomprehensibility.<sup>73</sup> The Incarnation reveals that human nature finds its fullest realization only in its total abandonment to God: "the Incarnation is the unique case of the perfect fulfilment of human reality—which means that a man only is when he gives himself away."<sup>74</sup> This giving of self is not theoretical but a free and decisive act—a concrete acceptance of God. To accept God is to embrace a life of radical obedience and self-abandonment, and it is in this surrender that the human person most fully becomes what they are: images and likenesses of God.

The notion of "abandonment" casts new light on the hypostatic union, which, for Rahner, is not a metaphysical puzzle but the clearest expression of God's will to unite fully with humanity. He presents the union of divine and human natures in Jesus of Nazareth as the fulfilment of what it means to be human: the deepest expression of God's self-giving love.<sup>75</sup>

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71. See Rahner, *Spiritual Exercises*, 99.

72. See Rahner, *Spiritual Exercises*, 100.

73. See Rahner, *Spiritual Exercises*, 101.

74. See Rahner, *Spiritual Exercises*, 100.

75. See Rahner, *Spiritual Exercises*, 105.

Rahner further contends that if the divine Logos truly became human, then Christ's humanity was not a fixed necessity but reveals that God can genuinely "become other,"—one with us.<sup>76</sup>

While remaining unchanged in divine essence, God freely pours Godself out in love, assuming what is fully and truly human. In this self-emptying (*kenosis*), God embraces human nature and finiteness not merely as an instrument or garment but as God's own reality. This demonstrates that, in the Incarnation, divine immutability is not compromised by God's "becoming" but is instead made manifest in a love so radical that it can assume the full depth of creaturely existence. In becoming human, therefore, God does not merely reveal something about Godself, but discloses what God really is: self-giving love in "otherness."

Rahner explains:

God has the possibility in the very act of divesting Himself, giving Himself away, of positing the other as His own reality. ... Because He pours Himself out and at the same time remains infinite fullness (since He is love, that is, the will to fill that which is empty, and since He has the means to fill with), the other comes into being as His own reality [*das Andere als seine Wirklichkeit 'setzt'*]. He constitutes that which is different from Himself because He retains it as His own; or, put the other way around, because He truly desires to have the other as His own, He constitutes it in its own true reality.<sup>77</sup>

The Incarnation reveals that God can freely "become other" without ceasing to be God. In Christ, God does not merely use a human nature, but assumes it as God's own reality through a self-emptying act of love—*kenosis*. This self-emptying does not contradict God's unchangeable nature; rather, it expresses it most profoundly, as the freedom and fullness of God's love embracing what is finite. God creates and sustains the "other" (human and historical) that God has become as truly distinct, yet truly God's own, precisely because God freely and lovingly wills it so. In this way, the Incarnation unveils not only the depth of

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76. Cf. Dulles, "The Ignatian Experience as Reflected in the Spiritual Theology of Karl Rahner," 475. Commenting on Rahner's theology of the Incarnation, he asserts that "God is perceived before us or within us as an object, as a being alongside of others."

77. Rahner, "Betrachtungen," 103; *Spiritual Exercises*, 106.

human dignity and historicity, but also something essential about the divine mystery itself: that God is love—a love capable of genuine “becoming” and of real union with what is essentially “other” than God.

This divine becoming confers a profound dignity upon concrete human existence, which, according to Rahner, must not be regarded lightly, for humanity has become the permanent form through which God has chosen to be present in the world for all eternity.<sup>78</sup> Rahner emphasizes that human nature is not something provisional and temporal—it is now eternally assumed by God. The Incarnation, therefore, demands that we recognise in the concrete dimension of our own existence—conscious of our inability to grasp it fully—the very reality in which God has made Godself present and near to us in love. He writes:

Now, if God Himself is man and remains man for all eternity, theology may not make light of man. For if it did, it would be making light of God Who remains the impenetrable mystery. For all eternity, man is the expressed mystery of God—thus participating in the mystery of His supporting ground. Hence, man must always be accepted in love as an inexhaustible mystery [*der Mensch als das unaustrinkbare Geheimnis in Liebe*—presupposing, of course, that we do not think we can grasp the full meaning of God’s self-expression (man) by ourselves, or that we can understand man in any other way but by seeing him in the blessed obscurity of God.<sup>79</sup>

The Incarnation confers the fullest dignity upon human nature: God freely chooses to assume and remain united with humanity for all eternity. This choice is not driven by necessity but by love for what is radically “other” than God’s self. As a result, concrete human existence—finite and historically embodied—is now the permanent form through which God is present in the world. The human person, as a concrete historical “spirit” in the world, occupies a

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78. Centering on the dignity that the Incarnation bestows on human nature—by the Logos becoming flesh—Rahner establishes a deep connection between Christ and humanity; between Christology and anthropology. He states: “Christology is the end and the beginning of anthropology, and this anthropology in its most basic form, that is, Christology, is theology for all eternity. This is the theology that God Himself proclaims when He speaks His Word as our flesh into the emptiness of Godlessness and sin. This is the theology that we ourselves then pursue in faith, provided that we do not think we can find God by simply ignoring the man Christ” (Rahner, *Spiritual Exercises*, 107).

79. Rahner, “Betrachtungen,” 112; *Spiritual Exercises*, 108–09.

central place in Rahner's reading of the Spiritual Exercises.

In Rahner's interpretation, the Spiritual Exercises are inseparable from the existential and historical reality of the exercitant. The decisive election for or against God is not made in some abstract sphere, but within the concrete circumstances of human life, with all their contingency, suffering, and joy.<sup>80</sup> Thus, the Exercises invite the retreatant to encounter God precisely in the world, recognising that the path to mystical union and holiness is always mediated through the embodied historical conditions which God has become, and in which God has chosen to dwell for all eternity.

#### **1.4.2. Discipleship, the Cross, and the Spirituality of Everyday Existence**

For Rahner, the heart of the Spiritual Exercises is discipleship (the active following of Christ) rooted in his understanding of the Incarnation as the event that reveals the full meaning of human existence.<sup>81</sup> The Incarnation reveals the full extent of God's self-abandoning love—a love that freely embraces humanity and the created order as God's own reality. In this sense, the Incarnation expresses God's unconditional love for each person and for all creation: a love made visible in the embodied, historical life of Jesus of Nazareth. Because Jesus' earthly life manifests the inner life of God's boundless love, to follow Christ in discipleship, as Rahner explains, is to participate in God's life itself—as Jesus declares, “He who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9).<sup>82</sup>

It is through grace that the believer is drawn into the very life of God. Rahner clarifies that grace is not merely a supernatural construct imposed from above, nor a mechanism that automatically sanctifies humanity and creation in an abstract way. Rather, he attributes the

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80. See also Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, trans. William V. Dych (New York: Crossroad, 1978), 100.

81. See Rahner, *Spiritual Exercises*, 114.

82. See Rahner, *Spiritual Exercises*, 114–15.

work of grace to “a concrete assimilation to Christ and a participation in His life.”<sup>83</sup>

Crucially, he warns against reducing this participation to a purely moral relationship based on external actions. Instead, grace calls us into true discipleship—into the mystery of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection—inviting us to conform ourselves to Christ’s image not only through outward deeds but through a deep, interior disposition of loyalty, surrender, and obedience.<sup>84</sup>

Discipleship, then, represents a concrete decision that is freely and intentionally made. It is a real and personal choice—a commitment to cooperate with God’s grace by integrating every aspect of one’s material existence in the world into a daily following of Christ.<sup>85</sup>

Discipleship, in the context of the Spiritual Exercises, is a call to embody Christ’s love through concrete, everyday decisions that align one’s life with the transformative reality of God’s grace—a grace freely offered to every human person.<sup>86</sup>

For Rahner, authentic discipleship is inseparable from the Cross, requiring a steadfast readiness to engage deeply with suffering. He emphasizes that a defining mark of following Christ is a steadfast orientation towards the Cross—a path that demands deep personal engagement with suffering.<sup>87</sup> For Ignatius, Rahner argues, the Cross symbolizes radical self-

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83. Rahner, *Spiritual Exercises*, 115.

84. See Rahner, *Spiritual Exercises*, 115–16.

85. See Rahner, *Spiritual Exercises*, 116–17.

86. In “Ignatius von Loyola an einen Jesuiten von heute” (1978), Rahner further emphasizes the embodiment of Christ’s love through concrete daily choices. He offers a theological reflection on the life, writings, and spirituality of St Ignatius, addressing key elements that shape Jesuit spirituality. Speaking as though in Ignatius’s own voice to contemporary Jesuits, Rahner stresses the active and incarnational character of Ignatian spirituality, which seeks to find God in all things. He emphasizes core themes such as discernment, personal choice, and the integral engagement of the whole person—body, soul, and intellect—in a transformative relationship with God through the ordinary circumstances of daily life. For Rahner, the Spiritual Exercises serve as a guide to this integrated spirituality, where the human encounter with God is grounded in concrete actions and decisions. Spirituality is not detached from the material and historical dimension of human existence in the world. With this, Rahner underscores Ignatius’s conviction that God is encountered in the ordinariness of everyday life, affirming that Ignatian spirituality is a faith rooted in concrete human experience. For further discussion, see Karl Rahner, “Ignatius von Loyola an einen Jesuiten von heute,” in *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 25, *Erneuerung des Ordenslebens: Zeugnis für Kirche und Welt*, edited by Andreas R. Batlogg (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2008), 299–29; *Ignatius of Loyola*, trans. Rosaleen Ockenden (London: Collins, 1979).

87. For further discussion, see Rahner, *Spiritual Exercises*, 236–40.

giving, revealing the full depth of God's free and unconditional love.<sup>88</sup> In this light, suffering is not something to be evaded but is embraced as a transformative response to God's love. Suffering is not a pious spiritual idea; it is experienced concretely in the trials and hardships of daily life.<sup>89</sup> By actively engaging with suffering—especially in confrontation with one's freedom in obedience to God's will—the disciple is drawn more fully into union with Christ's own suffering.

Rahner places love of neighbour at the centre of this suffering discipleship, seeing it as the concrete place where the Cross becomes visible.<sup>90</sup> For him, the goal of the Spiritual Exercises is to lead participants into a loving discipleship that takes shape in daily acts of care, solidarity, and service towards others.<sup>91</sup> He emphasizes that such concrete expressions of love are not secondary to the spiritual life, but are its primary manifestation.<sup>92</sup> It is precisely through these embodied everyday actions, even amid hardship and human suffering, that divine grace becomes real, tangible, and concretely experienced in the world.<sup>93</sup>

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88. See Rahner, *Spiritual Exercises*, 242–43.

89. See Rahner, *Spiritual Exercises*, 235–36.

90. In “Selbstverwirklichung und Annahme des Kreuzes” (1968), Rahner expands on the meaning of love as foundational to the Christian life. He delves into the existential and theological dimensions of human life, specifically addressing the paradox of fulfilling the commandment of love through self-renunciation and the transformative power of carrying one's Cross in weakness and vulnerability. Addressing the modern phenomenon of “frustration anxiety”—where the relentless pursuit of happiness leads to a hollow sense of dissatisfaction as individuals fail to embrace the finite nature of human life—Rahner emphasizes that every genuine human choice involves letting go of other possibilities and learning the wisdom of proportion. This act of letting go is not a resignation to emptiness but a surrender to God's “absolute future,” with faith and trust. For Rahner, this surrender mirrors the Christian call to “take up one's Cross,” a transformative act of trust in divine grace that allows individuals to find meaning even in the midst of concrete human hardships and suffering. For further discussion, see Karl Rahner, “Selbstverwirklichung und Annahme des Kreuzes,” in *Sämtliche Werke*, Bd. 23, *Glaube im Alltag: Schriften zur Spiritualität und zum christlichen Lebensvollzug*, ed. Albert Raffelt (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2006), 99–102; “Self-Realization and Taking Up One's Cross,” in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 9, *Writings of 1965–1967*, trans. Graham Harrison (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), 253–57.

91. See Rahner, *Spiritual Exercises*, 274–76.

92. See also Karl Rahner, *The Love of Jesus and the Love of Neighbor*, trans. Robert Barr (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 38–46.

93. See Rahner, *Spiritual Exercises*, 275–76.

In conclusion, this chapter has examined Rahner's retrieval of four formative sources in the Christian spiritual tradition, showing how each reinforces his conviction that human bodiliness (*Leiblichkeit*) is the locus of mystical encounter with God. In Origen, Rahner interprets the spiritual senses as awakened through moral purification in the material world, culminating in contemplative knowledge of God. In Bonaventure, he identifies the intellect and will as faculties perfected by grace and oriented towards a direct, affective union with God in ecstatic love, realized even amid the imperfections of earthly life. In Clement, he discerns an early theology of grace that refuses Gnostic dualism by affirming the believer as both *mundanus* and *supermundanus*—"of the world" yet "beyond the world." In Ignatius, he finds the paradigm of concrete discipleship: the Incarnation reveals that God has eternally embraced human nature, and thus the Christian vocation is lived in decisive choices and acts of love within everyday life.

Read together, these engagements reveal a consistent Rahnerian insight: Christian spirituality is inseparable from the concretely embodied dimension of human existence in the world. Mystical union is not attained in flight from the world but in the midst of it. Human history, with its joys and sufferings, becomes the privileged sphere of God's loving self-communication as grace. In this way, Rahner's early theology of the spiritual life anticipates his mature doctrine of the Incarnation, where the bodily and historical reality of human life is affirmed as the permanent and sacramental medium of God's presence in the world.

## Chapter 2

### ***Geist in Welt: Thomistic and Modern Foundations to Rahner's Metaphysics of Knowledge***

Rahner's *Geist in Welt* (1939) represents his first major engagement with Thomistic epistemology, focusing on the metaphysics of finite knowledge in dialogue with modern philosophy.<sup>94</sup> Originally written as his doctoral dissertation at Freiburg (*Geist in Welt: zur Metaphysik der endlichen Erkenntnis bei St. Thomas von Aquin*), it develops St. Thomas' account of knowledge in *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 84, a. 7, by situating it within a contemporary existential metaphysics.<sup>95</sup> Rahner shows that human knowing is neither a materialistic reduction to the cognition of physical objects nor an idealistic construction of reality within the intellect; rather, it is a metaphysical event grounded in the human subject, who exists concretely as an original unity of body and spirit.

This chapter explores the philosophical foundations that shaped *Geist in Welt*. Section one examines St. Thomas' account of knowledge, particularly the dependence of the intellect on phantasms or sensory images abstracted from concrete objects in the world. Section two considers modern influences—Kant's critique of metaphysical realism, Rousselot's retrieval of the intellect as participation in being, and Maréchal's transcendental dynamism. Together,

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94. See Karl Rahner, *Geist in Welt*, in *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 2, *Geist in Welt: Philosophische Schriften*, ed. Albert Raffelt (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1996), 1–300; *Spirit in the World*, trans. William V. Dych (New York: Continuum, 1968).

95. Rahner encountered setbacks when his dissertation supervisor, Martin Honecker, failed to appreciate the depth of his epistemological insights and the broader implications of his interpretation of St. Thomas' metaphysics of knowledge. As a result, his doctoral work was rejected (see Herbert Vorgrimler, *Understanding Karl Rahner: An Introduction to His Life and Thought*, trans. John Bowden [London: SCM Press, 1986], 61). Nevertheless, undeterred, Rahner revised and prepared the rejected dissertation for publication. In 1939, *Geist in Welt* was published by Felizian Rauch, a small press in Innsbruck (see Paul Imhof and Hubert Biallowons, eds., *Faith in a Wintry Season: Conversations and Interviews with Karl Rahner in the Last Years of His Life*, trans. Harvey D. Egan [New York: Crossroad, 1990], 44). The book was later edited and reorganized by Johannes Baptist Metz and republished in 1957 by Kösel-Verlag, Munich. This revised edition eventually appeared in English as *Spirit in the World* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968), translated by William Dych.

these influences prepare Rahner's reinterpretation of St. Thomas' epistemology as a metaphysics of human knowing that is finite, embodied, and yet transcendental.

### 2.1. St. Thomas' Theory of Knowledge: Foundations for *Geist in Welt*

This section examines St. Thomas' theory of knowledge in relation to Rahner's *Geist in Welt*. It focuses on the intellect as a potential knower that attains knowledge only through its dynamic encounter with material reality. The section addresses the following aspects of St. Thomas' epistemology: (1) the role of the intellect in the process of knowing, (2) the possibility of the knowledge of material things within the soul, (3) the question of innate knowledge, (4) the role of sense perception in intellectual cognition, and (5) the dependence of the intellect on phantasms.

#### 2.1.1. The Role of the Intellect in Human Knowing

St. Thomas situates his theory of knowledge by framing it within the broader context of ancient epistemology, first asking whether the human soul can know concrete objects through its innate intellectual power.<sup>96</sup> According to him, some early philosophers believed that the world was entirely composed of material substances (bodies) that were always in flux and subject to constant change. This led them to conclude that the human intellect could not attain fixed or certain knowledge of things in the world.<sup>97</sup>

As St. Thomas recounts, Plato, for example, had located knowledge in universal immaterial forms separated from concrete objects in the world, thereby displacing intellectual knowledge from concrete realities. St. Thomas rejects Plato's account on two main grounds: it undermines knowledge of concrete material realities and needlessly posits separate

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96. See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 84, a. 1, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 1920, New Advent, accessed February 17, 2024, <https://www.newadvent.org/summa/>

97. See St. Thomas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 84, a. 1.

universal forms as their true representatives. St. Thomas argues that to posit universal forms or species as the true nature of things would undermine the possibility of knowing concrete, material, and changeable realities—precisely those studied by the natural sciences.<sup>98</sup> If intellectual knowledge were limited solely to separate immaterial forms, then scientific knowledge of the physical world would be rendered impossible or meaningless. Second, St. Thomas finds it unreasonable to introduce entirely separate entities (universal forms) as the true representatives of material objects that are already perceptible to us in experience. In his view, universal forms cannot be the essence of material things if they are entirely distinct from and unrelated to the very objects they are supposed to represent.<sup>99</sup>

St. Thomas traces Plato's error to a misunderstanding of the relationship between knower and known. In his view, Plato assumed that for knowledge to be possible, a universal, immaterial, and immutable form must be present in the knower in exactly the same way as it exists in the known object.<sup>100</sup> According to St. Thomas, this leads to the mistaken conclusion that knowledge must pertain only to separate and immaterial species.<sup>101</sup> In contrast, St. Thomas maintains that the human soul gains knowledge not of immaterial forms existing apart from matter, but of bodily, material objects themselves. However, this knowledge is acquired through an immaterial, universal, and necessary mode of understanding proper to the intellect.<sup>102</sup> In affirming that the intellect knows material things rather than separated universal forms, St. Thomas emphasizes the essential role of concrete realities in the world as the foundation for all genuine intellectual knowledge.

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98. See St. Thomas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 84, a. 1.

99. See St. Thomas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 84, a. 1.

100. See St. Thomas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 84, a. 1.

101. See St. Thomas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 84, a. 1.

102. See St. Thomas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 84, a. 1.

### 2.1.2. The Possibility of Material Knowledge in the Soul

St. Thomas rejects the ancient argument for the possibility of material knowledge in the soul, chiefly because it fails to distinguish properly between intellect and sense.<sup>103</sup> He raises two principal objections. First, he argues that the claim—advanced by thinkers such as Empedocles—that the soul contains material knowledge rests merely on a hypothetical assumption, whereas genuine knowledge must be of actual things. Thus, positing that the soul somehow holds material knowledge does not adequately explain how such knowledge arises.<sup>104</sup> Secondly, St. Thomas maintains that if material objects had to exist within the soul in a bodily manner, then those objects would themselves need to possess knowledge, since they would exist as material knowers within the soul. But this is clearly not the case.<sup>105</sup> Therefore, he concludes that material things must be known by the soul only insofar as they exist immaterially in the intellect.<sup>106</sup>

For St. Thomas, the perfection of knowledge depends on the degree to which a being receives the immaterial or universal form of a concrete object. The intellect, which abstracts intelligible species not only from material phantasms but also from the imagination, thereby attains a more perfect mode of knowing.<sup>107</sup> He concludes that if there exists an intellect that knows all things immaterially and universally, then by its very essence it must possess perfect knowledge. This perfection, St. Thomas argues, belongs to God alone, whose knowledge contains all things universally. Only God knows all things through God's essence. In contrast,

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103. See St. Thomas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 84, a. 2.

104. See St. Thomas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 84, a. 2.

105. See St. Thomas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 84, a. 2.

106. See St. Thomas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 84, a. 2.

107. See St. Thomas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 84, a. 2.

neither the human soul nor the angels possess such universal knowledge of all things. Human beings must therefore come to know through their intellect, which is only actualized in relation to material or sensible objects.<sup>108</sup> For St. Thomas, the human soul acquires knowledge only insofar as it engages the material world; the intellect depends on concrete reality to become fully operative in its knowing function.

### 2.1.3. Innate Knowledge and the Potency of the Intellect

St. Thomas next considers whether the human soul possesses innate knowledge—intellectual knowledge existing independently of sensory experience. He begins by drawing from Aristotle’s principle that every material being acts according to its form: the specific nature or disposition that enables it to perform its proper operation.<sup>109</sup> For example, if upward motion is caused by the quality of lightness, then anybody capable of rising must already possess a light form suited to that movement.<sup>110</sup> Applying this principle to the human soul, St. Thomas raises the question of whether the intellect is endowed with a form or disposition that would allow it to possess knowledge innately, without recourse to the senses. In doing so, he sets the stage for a deeper examination of whether knowledge arises from within the soul itself or only through its engagement with the material world.<sup>111</sup>

For St. Thomas, the intellect is a natural power existing in potency, actualized only through its engagement with sensible objects in the material world. Through the process of abstraction, the intellect forms concepts from sensory phantasms and gradually advances towards understanding or intelligibility.<sup>112</sup> Thus, the intellect is not a self-sufficient knower

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108. See St. Thomas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 84, a. 2.

109. See St. Thomas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 84, a. 3.

110. See St. Thomas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 84, a. 3.

111. See St. Thomas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 84, a. 3.

112. See St. Thomas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 84, a. 3–4.

but a potential one, whose activity depends on external input from the sensory or material world.<sup>113</sup> Reaffirming Aristotle's principle that every being acts according to its form, St. Thomas concludes that the human intellect possesses no innate knowledge. It begins in potency, actualized only through contact with sensible reality. While later thinkers such as Locke would describe the intellect as a *tabula rasa*, Thomas' position is more precise: the intellect is a natural potency, ordered to being, which becomes actualized only through its engagement with the material world.<sup>114</sup>

#### 2.1.4. Knowledge and Sense Perception

St. Thomas also addresses whether intellectual knowledge originates solely from material objects, outlining three principal ancient views on the question. First, he discusses Democritus, who held that all knowledge originates from images emitted by material bodies. These images, he believed, enter the soul and are processed as knowledge.<sup>115</sup> Democritus, according to St. Thomas, did not distinguish clearly between the intellect and the bodily senses; rather, he overlooked this distinction and located the origin of all intellectual knowledge in sense impressions derived from the physical world.<sup>116</sup>

Secondly, St. Thomas interprets Plato as holding that the intellect functions independently of sensory experience, attaining knowledge through participation in eternal, immaterial and universal forms.<sup>117</sup> According to this reading, Plato maintained that intellectual knowledge is not acquired through contact with material objects but through the soul's participation in separate, immaterial intelligible forms or species. For Plato, sense

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113. See St. Thomas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 84, a. 3–4.

114. See St. Thomas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 84, a. 3–4.

115. See St. Thomas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 84, a. 5–6.

116. See St. Thomas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 84, a. 6.

117. See St. Thomas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 84, a. 6.

perception generates images or impressions of material things, but these serve merely as occasions for recollection—they are distinct from genuine knowledge, which arises through direct participation in the eternal universal forms.<sup>118</sup> Thus, in St. Thomas' interpretation, Plato clearly distinguishes intellectual knowledge from sense perception, locating true knowledge not in the empirical realm but in the immaterial and universal order of intelligible eternal forms.<sup>119</sup>

Thirdly, St. Thomas presents Aristotle's position as occupying a middle ground between Democritus and Plato. According to St. Thomas, Aristotle agreed with Plato in distinguishing intellectual knowledge from sense perception, but rejected the notion that knowledge arises from immaterial forms existing apart from the material world.<sup>120</sup> Unlike Democritus, who reduced all knowledge to sensory perception, Aristotle, according to St. Thomas, held that while the senses play an essential role in the process of knowing, intellectual knowledge extends beyond the senses.<sup>121</sup>

In St. Thomas' account, Aristotle holds that while the intellect depends on sensory experiences, it also possesses an agent intellect that abstracts universal concepts from sensory phantasms (*phantasmata*). These phantasms serve as the necessary starting point for intellectual understanding.<sup>122</sup> However, the agent intellect does not merely abstract phantasms; it illuminates and renders them intelligible. Thus, although intellectual knowledge requires the senses, it is not confined to them. The intellect forms universal and immaterial concepts that, while rooted in the material world, are not restricted to it.<sup>123</sup>

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118. See St. Thomas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 84, a. 6.

119. See St. Thomas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 84, a. 6.

120. See St. Thomas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 84, a. 6.

121. See St. Thomas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 84, a. 6.

122. See St. Thomas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 84, a. 6.

123. See *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 84, a. 6. On this issue, St. Thomas follows Aristotle in several key

### 2.1.5. The Dependence of the Intellect on Sensory Phantasms

St. Thomas holds that the senses supply phantasms for the agent intellect (*intellectus agens*) to abstract and the possible intellect (*intellectus possibilis*) to retain, but he then asks whether the intellect can function without these phantasms?<sup>124</sup> He answers in the negative. If the intellect's operations were wholly independent of the bodily senses, then injuries to the sensory organs would have no effect on intellectual activity.<sup>125</sup> Yet experience proves otherwise: even the faculties of imagination, memory, and abstract reasoning depend on the data provided by the senses. Therefore, injuries or impairments to the sensory organs—such as those caused by illness, delirium (*frenesis*), or lethargy—can diminish or even suspend the intellect's capacity to know—not merely in the moment, but even with respect to knowledge previously acquired.<sup>126</sup>

For St. Thomas, in this life the intellect cannot operate without the phantasms provided by the senses.<sup>127</sup> These phantasms are the necessary medium through which the agent intellect abstracts intelligible content. Thus, even though the intellect is immaterial in nature, its operations are conditioned by the bodily senses. This interdependence reveals the profoundly embodied character of human knowing in St. Thomas: no intellectual cognition is possible without the mediation of phantasms drawn from concrete, sensory experience in the world.

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respects. However, with regard to the possibility of intellectual knowledge apart from sense experience, Aristotle does not provide a definitive position. As Rahner observes, Thomas felt “abandoned” by Aristotle—his philosophical master—who offered no guidance on how to account for intellectual cognition independent of the senses (see Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 27). Consequently, St. Thomas concludes that intellectual knowledge is only possible through *phantasmata*—sensory images of material objects in the world—mediated and actualized by intellectual operations.

124. See St. Thomas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 84, a. 7.

125. See St. Thomas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 84, a. 7.

126. See St. Thomas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 84, a. 7.

127. See St. Thomas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 84, a. 7.

## 2.2. The Philosophical Background of *Geist in Welt*: Modern Influences

Although Rahner engages a wide range of philosophical ideas in *Geist in Welt*, the formative influence of Rousselot and Maréchal is especially decisive for understanding its foundations. To discuss the philosophical influences underlying *Geist in Welt*, this section will address three central concerns: (1) Kant's critique of medieval epistemology, (2) Rousselot's conception of the intellect as the dynamic power of the soul, and (3) Maréchal's critique of the Kantian notion of "thing-in-itself."

### 2.2.1. Kant's Critique of Epistemological Realism

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) posed the decisive challenge to medieval epistemological realism, particularly to the Thomistic principle of *adaequatio intellectus et rei* (truth as the conformity of intellect and reality).<sup>128</sup> In the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), Kant drew a sharp distinction between "phenomena" (things as they appear to us) and "noumena" (things-in-themselves, *Ding an sich*).<sup>129</sup> Human cognition, he argues, never has direct access to things as they exist independently, but only to appearances as they are mediated through the structures of human knowing.<sup>130</sup>

For Kant, these structures include the *a priori* forms of sensibility (space and time) and the categories of the understanding (quantity, quality, relation, and modality).<sup>131</sup> Far from passively receiving sensory impressions from the external world, the intellect actively

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128. This analysis does not claim to offer a comprehensive treatment of either the Thomistic epistemological concept of *adaequatio intellectus et rei* or Kant's *Critique*. Rather, its aim is to identify key insights from Kantian transcendental philosophy that posed substantial challenges to medieval epistemology.

129. See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A249–51, A255–56, trans. F. Max Müller, 2nd rev. ed. (London: Macmillan, 1902), 203–05, 207–09.

130. See Otto Muck, "Thomas – Kant – Maréchal: Karl Rahners transzendente Methode," in *Die philosophischen Quellen der Theologie Karl Rahners*, ed. Harald Schöndorf, *Quaestiones Disputatae* 213 (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2005), 33–34.

131. See Kant, *Critique*, A39–43, A70–76, trans. Müller, 39–41, 58–63.

synthesizes sensory data according to its innate *a priori* structures. Thus, knowledge does not arise from a direct conformity of intellect to external reality, but through the intellect's ability to shape concrete experience meaningfully. This "Copernican revolution" in philosophy, What Kant calls the "transcendental turn," placed the conditions of possibility for knowledge not in the object but in the knowing subject. It calls into question the possibility of direct access to the *Ding an sich* and thereby destabilizes the medieval confidence in metaphysical realism.<sup>132</sup>

The consequences of Kant's position were far-reaching. While phenomena are knowable, noumena remain inaccessible. Questions concerning God, the immortality of the soul, and human freedom lie beyond the bounds of possible experience and therefore cannot be objects of speculative knowledge.<sup>133</sup> In this way, Kant redefined metaphysics: no longer a science of being as such, but a critical investigation into the conditions and limits of human cognition. It was precisely this restriction of knowledge that later Catholic philosophers sought to overcome. Thinkers such as Rousselot and Maréchal did not dismiss Kant's insights but reformulated Thomistic realism in dialogue with them.<sup>134</sup> Both argued that the human intellect is not closed within phenomena but possesses an intrinsic dynamism that orients it beyond finite experience towards being as such. In this way, they sought to preserve the Thomistic conviction that reality is knowable while taking seriously Kant's insight into the active role of the knowing subject in shaping human experience and knowledge. This radical interpretation of Thomistic epistemology, popularized through Maréchal as "transcendental Thomism," provided the immediate philosophical horizon for Rahner's engagement with St.

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132. Muck, "Thomas – Kant – Maréchal: Karl Rahners transzendente Methode," 33.

133. Kant, *Critique*, A748–53; trans. Müller, 601–05.

134. For further discussion of this context, see Thomas Sheehan, *Karl Rahner: The Philosophical Foundations* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1987), 47–58.

Thomas' metaphysics of knowledge in *Geist in Welt*.<sup>135</sup>

### 2.2.2. The Intellect as Spiritual Participation in Being in Pierre Rousselot

Rousselot's *L'intellectualisme de saint Thomas* (1924) offered a groundbreaking reinterpretation of Thomistic epistemology by presenting the intellect not as a static faculty of concept-formation, but as a spiritual power of the soul, oriented towards God, the Absolute being.<sup>136</sup> His approach, which he calls "interiorized scholasticism," sought to rescue St. Thomas from both the rigidity of Neo-Scholastic manuals and the subjectivism of modern philosophy, by showing that knowledge is never merely conceptual but always a participation in the living reality of truth.<sup>137</sup>

In partial response to the rise of Neo-Kantianism, Rousselot critiques its tendency to reduce knowledge to a purely subjective construction.<sup>138</sup> Some Neo-Kantian thinkers—particularly in the Marburg and Southwest German schools—overemphasized the constitutive role of the subject in shaping knowledge, thereby downplaying any real spiritual participation in being.<sup>139</sup> Against this background, Rousselot defends the richness of Thomistic realism,

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135. While there is no single, universally accepted definition of "Transcendental Thomism," the term generally refers to a philosophical and theological approach that seeks to integrate the metaphysical principles of St. Thomas Aquinas with the critical insights of transcendental philosophy, particularly those of Kant. This school of thought explores the relationship between existence and knowledge as articulated by St. Thomas, while incorporating developments from modern philosophical currents such as phenomenology and existentialism. Transcendental Thomism does not reject Thomistic metaphysics but rather reinterprets its foundations in light of the knowing subject's dynamic orientation towards being. Although it expands the framework of Thomistic thought, it claims to remain faithful to the essential tenets of St. Thomas' doctrine. For an extended discussion of Transcendental Thomism, see Joseph Donceel, *The Philosophy of Karl Rahner* (New York: Magi Books, 1969), 12–18.

136. See Sheehan, *Karl Rahner*, 56.

137. For further discussion, see Hans Boersma, "A Sacramental Journey to the Beatific Vision: The Intellectualism of Pierre Rousselot," *Heythrop Journal* 49 (2008): 1015–21.

138. See D. C. Schindler, review of *Essays on Love and Knowledge*, ed. Andrew Tallon and Pol Vandeveldel; trans. Andrew Tallon, Pol Vandeveldel, and Alan Vincelette (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2008), in *H-France Review* 10, no. 138 (September 2010): 613.

139. See Gerald A. McCool, "Twentieth-Century Scholasticism," *Journal of Religion* 58, suppl., *Celebrating the Medieval Heritage: A Colloquy on the Thought of Aquinas and Bonaventure* (1978): S204–05, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41575991>.

arguing that human knowledge, while mediated through conceptual forms, is fundamentally a spiritual intuition grounded in concrete love and desire for ultimate truth.<sup>140</sup> He maintains that this interpretation remains truer not only to St. Thomas but also, in some respects, to the deeper tensions in Kant's own position—particularly the unresolved duality between phenomena and noumena.<sup>141</sup> Although Rousselot does not engage Kant directly in a systematic way, his work responds implicitly to the critical challenge posed by modern epistemology. His emphasis on the affective and spiritual unity of the knowing subject paves the way for later thinkers like Maréchal and Rahner, who would further integrate transcendental philosophy with the realism of Thomistic epistemology.

As Thomas Sheehan observes, Rousselot's reinterpretation of St. Thomas was creatively radical; he did not merely reproduce what St. Thomas had said, but “retrieved, reconstructed, and even modified St. Thomas, as much as St. Thomas had radically transformed Aristotle.”<sup>142</sup> At the core of his interiorized scholasticism, Rousselot presents the intellect as a spiritual power of the soul ordered towards knowing God, the fullness of being.<sup>143</sup> For Rousselot, the human intellect, as the knower, always has a proper object: being itself, which culminates analogically in God. The intellect's desire for truth is, thus, a participation in the divine intellect.<sup>144</sup> He finds support for this view in St. Thomas' doctrine of abstraction, which explains how the human intellect comes to know by grasping the essences of material things. According to Rousselot, St. Thomas understands these essences

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140. See Hans Boersma, “A Sacramental Journey to the Beatific Vision,” 1022.

141. See Sheehan, *Karl Rahner*, 57–58.

142. See Sheehan, *Karl Rahner*, 55.

143. See Pierre Rousselot, *The Intellectualism of Saint Thomas*, trans. James E. O'Mahony (London: Whitefriars Press, 1935), 192–93.

144. See Rousselot, *The Intellectualism of Saint Thomas*, 48–49.

as universals, abstracted from particular sensory data.<sup>145</sup> Through its natural operations, the human intellect processes these universals into knowledge and applies them to individual realities in the world.<sup>146</sup> As Rousselot interprets St. Thomas, we come to know individual things through phantasms or sense-based images from which the intellect abstracts intelligible content. Yet this process presupposes that phantasms, as intermediaries between sense and intellect, arise only through actual contact with the sensible world.<sup>147</sup>

For Rousselot, the human intellect is a spiritual power of the soul that opens the human person to the knowledge of God—the ultimate reality and source of everything knowable. While God possesses an active and comprehensive knowledge of all things by knowing Godself as their cause, the human intellect participates in this divine knowledge in a passive and receptive way. He writes:

The Cause of all being is the true mirror of reality such as it is in itself; creative Source of things that exist by participation, “spreading about It all being and degrees thereof,” Absolute Mind is at one and the same time perfect Immanence and ‘perfect Extensiveness penetrating to the depths of things. He alone is at home everywhere by intelligence Who knows all things by His own Essence, the unique, Source at once of reality and of truth. The human soul is intelligent because it has a “passive capacity” for all being; God is intelligent because He is the active Source of all being. “God’s knowledge is the cause of ‘things.’”<sup>148</sup>

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145. See Rousselot, *The Intellectualism of Saint Thomas*, 35–36. See also T. Aquinas, *STh*, q. 84, a. 7.

146. See Rousselot, *The Intellectualism of Saint Thomas*, 35–36.

147. For Rousselot, a universal cannot be regarded as a “thing” (*chose*) in itself. While the knowledge of a thing is mediated through universal concepts abstracted from *phantasms* (sensible images), these universals do not constitute concrete knowledge on their own. Rather, they must “return” to the *phantasm*—that is, be reintegrated with the sensible image—in order to become particular and determinate objects of knowledge. This dynamic reflects Rousselot’s understanding that the universal is not merely a detached intellectual form but part of an active cognitive movement grounded in the unity of intellect and sensibility. For further discussion, see Pierre Rousselot, *L’Intellectualisme de saint Thomas* (Paris: F. Alcan, 1908), 82–112; *The Intellectualism of St. Thomas*, 86–110.

148. Rousselot, *L’Intellectualisme*, 19–20; *The Intellectualism of Saint Thomas*, 31. In his reinterpretation of Thomistic epistemology, Rousselot argues that intellectual knowledge arises from the human intellect’s *passive* participation in God’s *active* and universal knowledge of all things. He understands *adaequatio rei et intellectus* not merely as a correspondence between the intellect and individual objects, but more fundamentally as a participation in the divine act of knowing. For Rousselot, human knowledge involves an active engagement with divine truth—an inner conformity to the Logos—through which the intellect comes to know both itself and the world. While not denying the role of abstraction from sensible reality, Rousselot frames this process within a deeper spiritual dynamic in which the human intellect is oriented towards the divine source of all intelligibility. This view stands in contrast to Kant’s model of the autonomous intellect, emphasising instead the intellect’s dependence on participation in divine truth in order to attain genuine

The proper object of the intellect is not simply the knowledge of individual objects, but being itself, ultimately, God, as the fullness and source of all intelligibility. Intellectual knowledge, in this sense, is not merely empirical or particular, but metaphysical and analogical, always oriented towards the divine ground of all being. Hence, when St. Thomas defines knowledge as *adaequatio intellectus et rei*, Rousselot contends that *rei* does not ultimately refer to this or that particular thing, but to the total intelligible reality in which all things participate—the divine intellect. Knowledge, therefore, is not exhausted by empirical abstraction but is grounded in the soul’s participation in the divine act of knowing.<sup>149</sup>

Rousselot holds that the human intellect can know particular objects because it participates in God’s universal knowledge of being.<sup>150</sup> He affirms that, according to St. Thomas, the proper object of the human intellect is “being as such”—that is, the universal horizon of intelligibility in which all things participate. Through its participation in this universal knowledge of being, the intellect is able to attain a conscious awareness of itself (self-knowledge) as well as knowledge of individual, concrete realities in the world.<sup>151</sup> Although Rousselot seldom explicitly engages with Kant in *L’Intellectualisme*, his understanding of intellectual knowledge as participation in the divine intellect can be read as a response to the modern view of the autonomous subject. Kant had argued that human knowledge arises through the *a priori* structures of the intellect, which organise experience from within, independently of any access to the thing-in-itself. By contrast, Rousselot insists that the human intellect does not originate or generate knowledge autonomously. Rather, it knows only insofar as it shares, analogically and receptively, in the universality of God’s

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knowledge of being in general.

149. Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *De veritate* q. 1 a. 1.

150. See Rousselot, *L’Intellectualisme*, 64–66.

151. For further discussion, see Rousselot, *L’Intellectualisme*, 238–42.

knowledge, which alone encompasses all being.<sup>152</sup>

Grounding his argument in the Thomistic doctrine of abstraction, Rousselot affirms that while human knowledge begins with sensory experience, it is ultimately fulfilled through a spiritual orientation towards the divine. For Rousselot, the proper object of the intellect is being in its fullness, which culminates in God as the ground of all intelligibility. Knowledge, therefore, is not exhausted in abstraction from sensory objects but expresses the intellect's spiritual participation in absolute truth. This participatory emphasis marks his distinct contribution to the renewal of Thomism and anticipates the transcendental Thomism later developed by Maréchal and, decisively, by Rahner.

### 2.2.3. The Transcendental Dynamism of the Human Intellect in Joseph Maréchal

Maréchal, writing a generation later, systematized the renewal of Thomism in what came to be known as “transcendental Thomism.” Engaging Kant directly, Maréchal reframed the Thomistic principle of *adaequatio intellectus et rei* as a dynamic orientation of the intellect towards Absolute Being.<sup>153</sup> In his multi-volume *Le point de départ de la métaphysique* (1922–1944), he argued that the very structure of human knowing discloses a transcendental dynamism towards Absolute Being, thereby bridging St. Thomas with the challenges of critical philosophy.<sup>154</sup>

Like Rousselot, Maréchal grounded human knowledge in the intellect's openness to God, the Absolute Being, but framed this more explicitly through Kantian epistemology. For Maréchal, the human intellect is oriented towards truth as such—that is, towards absolute or

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152. See Rousselot, *The Intellectualism of Saint Thomas*, 86–87.

153. See Gerald A. McCool, “Twentieth-Century Scholasticism,” 214–15.

154. See Julien Lambinet, review of *Question de méthode: la nature de l'entrée en métaphysique selon Maréchal*, by Paul Gilbert, H. Jacobs, E. Tourpe, M. Vertin, and F. G. Brambilla, *Revue Philosophique de Louvain* 100, no. 1/2 (2002): 216–22, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26342064>.

total being—which ultimately leads it to a dynamic or transcendental openness to the divine intellect.<sup>155</sup> This orientation does not guarantee immediate knowledge of God, but rather constitutes the condition of possibility for knowing anything at all. It is through a reflective “return-to-itself” (*rappporter à soi*), that the subject recognises that its capacity for knowledge presupposes an absolute horizon of intelligibility. In this way, Maréchal argues that the intellect’s self-awareness or consciousness is inseparable from its openness to being and thus to God as the ground of all knowledge.<sup>156</sup>

Maréchal builds on Thomistic principles but reinterprets them through a transcendental lens, offering a systematic synthesis that engages critically with Kant and post-Kantian thought.<sup>157</sup> While following the path opened by Rousselot, Maréchal offers a more systematic philosophical synthesis, seeking not only to retrieve St. Thomas but to respond constructively to the challenges posed by post-Kantianism. More than Rousselot, he seeks to reassert the metaphysical realism of St. Thomas while integrating the epistemological insights of Kant’s emphases on the subject.<sup>158</sup> To appreciate the originality of Maréchal’s position, it is essential to begin with his reinterpretation of the Thomistic definition of truth.

For St. Thomas, truth is defined as *adaequatio intellectus et rei* (the conformity of intellect and thing) yet Maréchal reinterprets this as an active, dynamic relation between the intellect and the fullness of being. Traditionally, this definition was taken to describe a static

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155. For further discussion, see Joseph Maréchal, *Le point de départ de la métaphysique, Leçons sur le développement historique du problème de la connaissance, Cahier V: Le Thomisme devant la Philosophie critique* (Paris: Éditions du Muséum Lessianum, 1926), 23–27.

156. See Maréchal, *Le point de départ de la métaphysique*, 300. For further discussion on Maréchal’s interpretation of Thomistic epistemology, see Karl-Heinz Weger, *Karl Rahner: An introduction to His Theology*, trans. David Smith (London: Burns & Oates Ltd., 1980), 22–34.

157. See Gerald A. McCool, “Twentieth-Century Scholasticism,” 214–15.

158. For further discussion, see Thomas Sheehan, *Karl Rahner*, 55–96.

correspondence between a mental concept and an external object. Maréchal, however, interprets it in a deeper and more dynamic sense. He sees *adaequatio* as expressing not merely a passive conformity of the mind with objects in the world, but the active relationship between the intellect and its proper object—ontological truth as the fullness of being.<sup>159</sup> Knowledge arises, for Maréchal, not simply when the mind reproduces what is outside it, but when it interiorly actualizes its transcendental openness to being in the immanent act of knowing:

The state of a subject who is, at the same time, in the identity of their immanent act, both self and other, realizes, according to St. Thomas, the “ratio formalis veri” (*Verit.* 1.1, c), this perfection experienced by the intellect, which is itself the immediate principle, or more precisely, the ontological counterpart of cognition (*cognitio*). Objective knowledge will thus simply be the consciousness (*cognitio*) of the object, within and according to the relationship of truth—*adaequatio intellectus et rei*—as experienced by the subject.<sup>160</sup>

In this view, *adaequatio intellectus et rei* describes not only a correspondence between the intellect and an external object, but a metaphysical event: a conscious synthesis in which the intellect, in the external act of knowing, becomes internally united with God, the absolute truth.

For Maréchal, knowledge arises in a conscious, self-reflexive “return to self” in which the intellect recognises its encounter with absolute truth as its proper object. This return is a metaphysical awakening to the reality and existence of being as such. Knowledge (*cognitio*) emerges when the intellect, moved by the intrinsic dynamism of its own transcendental structure, returns reflexively to itself and recognises its encounter with Absolute Being, as its proper object.<sup>161</sup> Thus, for Maréchal, *adaequatio* signifies the dynamic participation of the

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159. See Maréchal, *Le point de départ de la métaphysique*, 74

160. Maréchal, *Le point de départ de la métaphysique*, 74: “L’état d’un sujet qui est tout ensemble, dans l’identité de son acte immanent, soi et l’autre, réalise, d’après St. Thomas, la « ratio formalis veri » (*Verit.* 1. 1, c), cette perfection vécue de l’intellect, qui est, elle-même, le principe immédiat, ou, plus exactement, l’avant ontologique de la *cognitio*. La connaissance objective sera donc simplement la prise de conscience (*cognitio*) de l’objet, dans et selon le rapport de vérité — *adaequatio intellectus et rei* — vécu par le sujet.”

161. Maréchal reinterprets the “transcendental” not as a limitation on knowledge, as in Kant, but as the

intellect in being—not a passive conformity of the mind to things, but as a spiritual openness to reality grounded in the intellect’s transcendental structure. In this way, Maréchal reconfigures Thomistic epistemology as a synthesis of metaphysical realism and transcendental subjectivity, laying the groundwork for Rahner’s Thomistic metaphysics of finite knowledge.

For Maréchal, Kant’s error lies in reducing *adaequatio intellectus et rei* to a correspondence limited to sensory phenomena, thereby excluding access to the “thing-in-itself” (*Ding an sich*). This conceptual narrowing led Kant to restrict knowledge to the realm of phenomenal experience as shaped by the intellect’s own *a priori* transcendental structures. While Maréchal, like Kant, acknowledges that human knowledge originates within the *a priori* intellectual structures of the knowing subject, he decisively departs from Kant’s transcendental idealism by insisting that the intellect’s ability to know is not grounded in an *a priori* “autonomy,” but in its *a priori* “openness” to, and participation in Absolute Being. Hence, for Maréchal, the intellectual affirmation of being must not only be externalized through matter but ultimately analogized to the supreme existential source of matter: the Absolute Being as Pure Act (*L’Acte pur*):

Within the framework of a consistent [*franche*] metaphysics about act and potency, it will therefore be held as demonstrated that every abstract concept, objectified in an affirmation of being, must not only have become concrete by reference to matter—and thus already externalized in relation to thought—but above all must have subordinated itself, according to the law [*relation*] of analogy, to a higher and absolute existential condition, which likewise cannot remain internal to our thought, and indeed can only be the absolute summit [*supérieure et absolue*] of Reality: the Pure Act.<sup>162</sup>

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intellect’s innate dynamism towards Infinite Being. Whereas Kant confines transcendental structures to the realm of phenomena, Maréchal affirms that the human intellect is constitutively oriented towards being as such. Reflexively, the intellect becomes aware of its own encounter with being, such that knowledge is no longer merely representational but becomes a metaphysical participation in reality. In this way, Maréchal transforms Kant’s epistemological critique into a Thomistic affirmation of ontological truth. See also Denis J. M. Bradley, “Transcendental Critique and Realist Metaphysics,” *The Thomist: A Speculative Quarterly Review* 39, no. 4 (October 1975): 641–42, <https://doi.org/10.1353/tho.1975.0068>.

162. Maréchal, *Le point de départ de la métaphysique*, 251: “Dans le cadre d’une métaphysique franche de l’acte et de la puissance, on tiendra donc pour démontré, que tout concept abstrait, objectivé dans une affirmation d’être, a dû non seulement se concrétiser par référence à la matière, et déjà s’extérioriser ainsi par

Maréchal affirms that intellectual knowledge does not originate solely from the inner, subjective operations of the mind. Rather, every concept that affirms being must be related not only to matter (and thus externalized) but also analogically referred to a higher ontological source—namely, the Absolute Being. The human intellect is therefore structured by a transcendental dynamism towards being. The intellect is not self-enclosed but constituted by a dynamic original openness to being as such. This foundational orientation towards the Absolute Being is the very condition for metaphysical knowledge and grounds the intellect’s capacity for truth beyond the mere limits of phenomenal experience.<sup>163</sup> In this way, Maréchal retrieves Thomistic realism within a metaphysical framework that preserves both the autonomy of the subject’s intellectual operations and its real participation in Absolute Being.

Maréchal argues that knowledge rests on ontological truth (*vérité ontologique*) grounded in the divine intellect, not solely on data from empirical observation.<sup>164</sup> This ontological truth does not originate in the senses but serves as the transcendental condition that makes all empirical knowing possible.<sup>165</sup> Hence, every human act of knowing is already

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rapport à la pensée, mais surtout se subordonner, selon la relation d’analogie, à une condition existentielle supérieure et absolue, qui ne peut davantage demeurer interne à notre pensée, et même qui ne peut être que le sommet absolu du Réel, l’Acte pur.”

163. See also Bradley, “Transcendental Critique and Realist Metaphysics,” 641.

164. Maréchal clarifies and develops the Thomistic distinction between ontological truth (*vérité ontologique*) and logical truth (*vérité logique*), grounding ontological truth in the object’s participation in the divine Intellect, independently of any act of human cognition. In contrast to Kant, who confines truth to the subjective operations of the intellect, Maréchal affirms that metaphysical knowledge is possible only because being itself communicates truth through its intrinsic relation to God as Absolute Truth (*Vérité absolue*). For further discussion, see Maréchal, *Le point de départ de la métaphysique*, 54–77.

165. See Maréchal, *Le point de départ de la métaphysique*, 448. Maréchal also entertains the possibility of knowing God—or the Absolute Being—through direct intuition, in which God impresses God’s very self immediately upon the human soul. However, he clearly acknowledges that such knowledge lies beyond the limits of philosophical speculation. In Thomistic thought, immediate and intuitive knowledge of God cannot be attained through natural reason or metaphysical inquiry; rather, it is reserved for the beatific vision, wherein the blessed see God as God is in God’s own being (*Summa Theologiae*, I–II, q. 3).

a participation in the divine source of intelligibility. While acknowledging the indispensable role of the senses in Thomistic epistemology, Maréchal maintains that the intellect's dynamic openness to being is ontologically prior to sense experience—rendering the notion of purely phenomenal knowledge both inconceivable and epistemologically incoherent.

A theory of knowledge, developed within the framework of ontological realism, necessitates a coherent epistemology. This stems from the principle that every assertion must accurately connect its content to the absolute essence of being. Put simply, purely phenomenal knowledge is inconceivable and unattainable.<sup>166</sup>

For Maréchal, knowledge must be anchored in ontological realism: every instance of phenomenal knowledge necessarily points to Absolute Being as its ultimate ground. A purely phenomenalist or subjectivist account of knowledge—one that denies the noumenal order or excludes the question of Absolute Being—is not merely incomplete, but incoherent. In this way, Maréchal frames the doctrine of participation as a metaphysical resolution to the epistemological impasse left by Kant's *Critique*.

For Maréchal, the divine intellect is the ultimate source of all human knowledge, and the human intellect knows only through its dynamic openness to this intellect. Intellectual knowledge is not merely the direct apprehension of a particular object in the world, but a self-consciousness (*conscience de soi*) through which the intellect becomes aware of itself as a finite being-in-the-world.<sup>167</sup> It is capable of knowing both itself and other beings precisely

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166. Maréchal, *Le point de départ de la métaphysique*, 35: “Une théorie de la connaissance, développée dans le cadre du réalisme ontologique, vaut absolument et commande une épistémologie proprement dite, sous la seule condition suivante: que toute affirmation rapporte nécessairement et valablement son contenu à l'absolu de l'être, ou, plus brièvement, qu'une connaissance purement phénoménale soit impensable et impossible.”

167. See Maréchal, *Le point de départ de la métaphysique*, 117. Maréchal's analysis plays a decisive role in shaping the development of a transcendental metaphysics grounded in the human person's openness to being. Drawing from Kant, Maréchal affirms that the human intellect possesses *a priori* structures that precede all empirical knowledge of particular beings and make self-consciousness possible. However, unlike Kant, he argues that these *a priori* conditions are not autonomous or self-sufficient; rather, they are rooted in the dynamic orientation of the intellect towards absolute truth. Divine truth, then, is not merely an external object of cognition but constitutes the intellect's original and necessary horizon. This orientation transforms the knowing subject into a being constituted by participation in transcendental truth. In this way, Maréchal reinterprets St. Thomas' epistemology in dialogue with modern critical philosophy—an approach that explicitly conceives knowledge as a dynamic openness towards absolute being in general.

because it participates in, and remains metaphysically ordered towards, the all-knowing divine intellect.

Maréchal's concept of affirmation (*affirmation*) expresses the intellect's *a priori* participation in ontological truth as the basis for its self-awareness as a knowing subject.<sup>168</sup> It signifies that the intellect's participation in ontological truth is the very condition for its ability to become aware of itself as a conscious knower. In other words, the intellect experiences itself concretely as a knowing being-in-the-world among other beings precisely because it is already, by nature, oriented towards being and truth. This interior participation in divine truth grounds the intellect's capacity not only to know external realities but also to affirm itself as a subject within the horizon of being.<sup>169</sup>

In Maréchal's Thomistic reading, affirmation occurs only through the intellect's engagement with sensibility (*sensibilité*), where "material" reality is already shaped by the intellect's *a priori* openness to being. Drawing from St. Thomas, Maréchal uses sensibility to show that what the intellect perceives as concretely material in any act of knowledge is not simply a physical or external object in itself (*en soi*).<sup>170</sup> Rather, what is perceived as material is already shaped by the immaterial act of *affirmation*—that is, the intellect's interior receptivity and *a priori* orientation towards Absolute Being, which makes knowledge possible. In this view, the "sensible" (*sensibilité*) is not merely raw, empirical data, but the

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168. See Maréchal, *Le point de départ de la métaphysique*, 222.

169. See Maréchal, *Le point de départ de la métaphysique*, 222–24.

170. According to Maréchal, St. Thomas understands sensibility (*sensibilité*) not merely as the passive reception of sensory data, but as the metaphysical point of contact between the material world and the intellect's spiritual openness to being. For Maréchal, the material or concrete world itself participates in God's act of being (*actus essendi*), and thus becomes the medium through which truth is actualized. Knowledge of the material world, therefore, is never confined to empirical data alone; it simultaneously opens onto the metaphysical order—towards the Absolute Being from which all intelligibility ultimately derives (see Maréchal, *Le point de départ de la métaphysique*, 310–12). In *sensibilité*, intellectual knowledge—understood as a transcendental participation in divine truth—finds its concrete and objective realization. While the human intellect knows only through its participation in the divine intellect, this knowledge becomes genuinely objective when the intellect affirms itself consciously as a knowing subject in the world.

concrete actualization of what the intellect already anticipates through its spiritual openness to divine or ontological truth.<sup>171</sup> He explains:

The emergence [of knowledge] is realized in all material entities capable of strictly immanent operation. Within these entities, material reception, owing to the indivisible unity and relative excellence of their form, can extend into immaterial reception, thereby implying knowledge. This is particularly evident in beings endowed with sensibility. According to St. Thomas' ontological theory of sensible knowledge, the entire concept hinges on the continuum between the material receptivity of the *sensorium* and the immaterial, 'spiritual' receptivity (purely formal in nature) of the sensitive faculty, which constitutes the form of the *sensorium*.<sup>172</sup>

Here, sensibility (*sensibilité*)<sup>173</sup> serves as the point of contact between the senses and the intellect. In the human person, the experience of the material world through the senses is intrinsically bound to a deeper, spiritual capacity for knowledge. When the intellect recognises something as material, it does not merely register an external object in itself; rather, it perceives this materiality as the immaterial actualization or the concrete manifestation of what it already anticipates interiorly through its *a priori* openness to ontological truth.<sup>173</sup>

While affirming knowledge as *adaequatio*, Maréchal distinguishes between “conformity in action” (*actio*) and “conformity in act” (*actus*), emphasising the latter as a

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171. See Maréchal, *Le point de départ de la métaphysique*, 84–85.

172. Maréchal, *Le point de départ de la métaphysique*, 85: “Cette émergence est réalisée dans tous les sujets matériels capables d’une opération « strictement immanente ». Chez eux, la réception matérielle pourra, grâce à l’unité indivise et à l’excellence relative de leur forme, se prolonger en une réception immatérielle, qui implique connaissance. Tel est très particulièrement le cas des êtres doués de sensibilité. La théorie ontologique de la connaissance sensible, chez St. Thomas, repose tout entière sur la continuité de la réceptivité matérielle du *sensorium* avec la réceptivité immatérielle, « spirituelle » (c’est-à-dire d’ordre purement « formel »), de la faculté sensible, forme du *sensorium*.”

173. Maréchal thus proposes that intellectual knowledge, as a participation in the divine intellect, assumes its concrete and objective form only through sensibility. Sensibility refers to the embodied and experiential contact with the material world, through which the intellect’s innate openness to being is actualized. According to Maréchal, it is precisely in this encounter with the sensible that knowledge attains its fullest expression, because it is only in the world of concrete experience that the intellect affirms itself as a knowing subject. In other words, intellectual knowledge becomes objective not by abstraction alone, but by the unity of sensibility and intellect in the act of *affirmation*—where the intellect recognises both the world and itself as an ontological unity within the horizon of being.

transcendental participation in being. In *actio*, knowledge is seen as the result of an external interaction between the intellect and a material object in the world. Maréchal argues that this view misrepresents the deeper Thomistic understanding of *adaequatio*, since St. Thomas does not describe knowledge as a mere effect of causal contact between subject and object. Rather, *actus* refers to a transcendental participation in being itself: knowledge is not produced or constructed but enacted as the self-realization or act of the intellect in its ontological openness to truth. In this view, the human intellect, as a spiritual power of the soul, does not autonomously generate knowledge but participates *a priori* in being, which has its ground in the divine intellect. As *actus*, knowledge is not merely an intellectual conformity to sensory objects, but a metaphysical event—the intellect’s becoming-present to being through an intrinsic orientation towards truth.<sup>174</sup>

Maréchal’s distinctive achievement was to demonstrate that every act of knowledge presupposes the intellect’s transcendental openness to God as Pure Act—the horizon that grounds human knowledge in finite existence while simultaneously surpassing it. In contrast to Rousselot’s more affective and participatory emphasis, Maréchal offered a systematic philosophical synthesis that united Thomistic realism with the Kantian turn to the subject. This framework decisively shaped Rahner’s *Geist in Welt*, which develops a metaphysics of knowledge as the transcendental act of the embodied human subject as a finite knower (“spirit”) in the world.

This chapter has examined the philosophical foundations that shaped Rahner’s *Geist in Welt*, situating it within both Thomistic and modern philosophical traditions. On the one hand, St. Thomas’ epistemology, especially his account of the intellect’s dependence on phantasms, grounds knowledge in the embodied human encounter with material reality. On

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174. For further discussion of knowledge as *actus* and *actio*, see Maréchal, *Le point de départ de la métaphysique*, 60–65.

the other hand, the modern reappropriations of Thomism by Rousselot and Maréchal extend this foundation in different but complementary ways. Rousselot stressed the intellect's participatory orientation towards divine truth, portraying knowledge as a spiritual movement of the soul that culminates in God. Maréchal, by contrast, systematized this intuition through a transcendental synthesis, showing that every act of finite knowing presupposes an *a priori* intellectual orientation towards Absolute Being. Taken together, their contributions enabled Rahner to articulate a metaphysics of finite knowledge, in *Geist in Welt*, in which human knowing is at once embodied, historical, and transcendental.

## Chapter 3

### ***Geist in Welt: Knowledge as the Metaphysical Experience of Being-in-the-World***

Rahner's *Geist in Welt* (1939) represents his earliest major philosophical work and a decisive reinterpretation of St. Thomas' theory of knowledge. Composed under the influence of both transcendental Thomism (Rousselot, Maréchal) and Heideggerian existentialism, the work shifts the focus of epistemology from abstract cognition to the metaphysical structure of the human person as an embodied subject in the world.<sup>175</sup> Knowledge, for Rahner, is not a merely intellectual process but a metaphysical event: it arises from the unity of intellect and sensibility in the concrete existence of the human being as *Geist in Welt*—spirit-in-world whose capacity to know is inseparable from their embodied historical situatedness (*Leiblichkeit*) in the world.<sup>176</sup>

While Rahner remains faithful to St. Thomas' principle that the intellect can know nothing unless it first exists in the senses (*nihil est in intellectu quod non prius fuerit in sensu*), he reformulates this principle in a modern existential perspective by showing that knowledge is not simply the reception of sensible intellectual forms but the expression of the

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175. For further discussion of the influence of Heidegger's existentialism on Rahner, see Albert Raffelt and Hansjürgen Verweyen, *Karl Rahner* (Munich: C. H. Beck Verlag, 1997), 28–31. Under Heidegger's influence, the human person as a concrete bodily spirit in the world assumes the central place in Rahner's philosophical system. In his early essay "Introduction au concept de philosophie existentielle chez Heidegger" (1940), Rahner explicitly acknowledges that Heidegger had shifted the philosophical question concerning the human being away from the traditional, abstract conception of *animal rationale* and towards the concretely embodied subject. This decisive turn provides what Rahner terms the formal concept of a transcendental existential philosophy, which undergirds his own philosophical anthropology (see Karl Rahner, "Introduction au concept de philosophie existentielle chez Heidegger," in *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 2, *Geist in Welt: Schriften zur Philosophie*, ed. Albert Raffelt [Freiburg: Verlag Herder, 1996], 317–46; English trans. Andrew Tallon, "The Concept of Existential Philosophy in Heidegger," *Philosophy Today* 13, no. 2 [Summer 1969]: 126–37, at 130–31, <https://doi.org/10.5840/philtoday196913229>).

176. While Rahner acknowledges that his approach departs from traditional Scholastic epistemology, he sees this as necessary for addressing the existential and intellectual challenges of his time. For Rahner, philosophy must respond to the existential and intellectual challenges of its historical context, even if this entails moving beyond classical methods of philosophising (See Rahner, author's introduction to *Spirit in the World*, trans. William V. Dych [New York: Continuum, 1968], lii).

human subject's ontological constitution as a bodily spirit in the world. The act of knowing is always an existential affirmation of being, in which intellect and sensibility are bound together in an original unity. Rahner insists that to know is to be embodied, and to be embodied is already to stand within the horizon of knowing.

This chapter proceeds in three sections. Section one examines Rahner's reading of St. Thomas' epistemology, with particular attention to the relational structure of intellect and sensibility. Section two turns to the Thomistic principle of *conversio ad phantasma*, showing how Rahner interprets it as the decisive expression of embodied knowing in which "abstraction" (*abstractio*) and "conversion" (*conversio*) are inseparable moments of the single act of knowing. Section three considers the metaphysical implications of this account, focusing on *Fragbarkeit*—the radical questionability embedded in human nature—and Rahner's notion of trans-categorical unity, which together reveal knowledge as both grounded in the material world and in the transcendental structures of the human person as a bodily spirit. Through this analysis, *Geist in Welt* emerges not simply as a study in Thomistic epistemology but as a metaphysical anthropology: a vision of the human being as an embodied spirit whose knowledge is always already a participation in being itself.

### 3.1. Embodied Metaphysics: Intellect and Sensibility

This section examines Rahner's Thomistic claim that human knowledge is a unity of intellect and sensibility. This unity is expressed concretely in the human person as an embodied spiritual subject in the world. "Bodiliness" (*Leiblichkeit*) thus emerges as the fundamental ground of all human knowing. The section's argument will be developed through two central themes: (1) the relationship between intellect and sensibility, and (2) knowledge as a unity of these two dimensions.

### 3.1.1. The Relational Structure of Intellect and Sensibility

In *Geist in Welt*, Rahner presents intellectual knowledge as a metaphysical encounter with concrete, material being, captured in the notion of “spirit-in-world.” The translation “spirit-in-world” is more faithful to Rahner’s metaphysical vision than “spirit-in-the-world.” It more accurately renders the original German *Geist in Welt* and reflects Rahner’s conviction that, within his metaphysical framework, there is no real separation between “spirit” (*Geist*) and “world” (*Welt*) in the act of human knowing. *Spirit* refers to the intellectual capacity that reaches towards the world and beyond in its openness to being, while *world* signifies the concrete, embodied reality through which the human person immediately experiences existence.<sup>177</sup> Thus, human knowledge, as spirit-in-world, is an intellectual act intrinsically grounded in human embodiment.

Rahner’s aim is to show that, following St. Thomas, intellectual knowledge is inseparable from the human person’s ontological structure as a bodily spirit in the world.<sup>178</sup> He does not treat the intellect purely as a spiritual faculty of the soul; rather, the intellect is, properly speaking, the “human spirit”—that is, the concrete human person who exists in and through bodiliness, and by this very bodiliness reaches towards knowledge of realities beyond the world:

The object which belongs properly to the intellect of man, who exists in corporeality [*Leiblichkeit*], is the quiddity or the nature of corporeal things [*Körperdinge*] (things of the world). And through this nature of sensible things he also reaches out to some knowledge of non-sensible things.<sup>179</sup>

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177. See Rahner, author’s introduction to *Spirit in the World*, liii.

178. Cf. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (New York: Routledge, 2012), 94–100. Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961) argues that the body is not merely an object but the very subject of experience and the vehicle of being-in-the-world. His phenomenological insight resonates with Rahner’s view that intellectual knowledge is grounded in the transcendental, embodied subject, who exists as an original unity of intellect (“spirit”) and sensibility (“body”).

179. Rahner, *Geist in Welt*, 21; *Spirit in the World*, 7. “Der dem Intellekt des in der Leiblichkeit existierenden Menschen eigentümlich zukommende Gegenstand ist jedoch die Washeit oder die Natur der Körperdinge (Welt Dinge). Und durch diese Natur der sinnlichen Dinge hindurch greift er auch aus zu irgendeiner Erkenntnis der unsinnlichen Dinge.”

Thus, Rahner's central claim is that intellectual knowledge must be understood in light of the human person's ontological structure as a bodily being in the world. The intellect is not an abstract or disembodied mind but the whole concrete person who knows through and with bodiliness. It is precisely through the body that the human person engages with the world and thereby comes to know not only sensible, material realities, but also non-sensible ones.

To understand the centrality of bodiliness in *Geist in Welt*, one must examine Rahner's account of human knowledge as rooted in the bodily experience of being as expressed through Thomistic categories. Rahner uses two Thomistic categories, "intellect" (*Intellekt*) and "sensibility" (*Sinnlichkeit*), to explain human knowledge. According to him, knowledge is not merely a noetic process concerned with the cognitive operations of the human intellect, but a metaphysical reality grounded in the ontological structure of the human person as a being in the world whose intellect can orient itself towards divine truth. The relationship between intellect and sensibility is crucial to understanding his view of intellectual knowledge as a metaphysics of being.<sup>180</sup> To proceed, it is necessary to clarify the relationship between intellect and sensibility.

Rahner affirms the Thomistic distinction between the agent intellect (*intellectus agens*) and the possible intellect (*intellectus possibilis*) as foundational to a metaphysics of knowledge. The agent intellect is the active and illuminative power of the soul that abstracts

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180. In *Geist in Welt*, Rahner's aim is not to provide a "critique" but rather a "metaphysics" of knowledge within the Thomistic tradition (see Rahner, author's introduction to *Spirit in the World*, liii). He insists on a fundamental distinction between these two approaches. A critique of knowledge—what he refers to as "noetic hylomorphism"—seeks to examine the possibilities and limitations of intellectual knowledge. In contrast, a metaphysics of knowledge—termed "ontological hylomorphism"—concerns itself with the nature of the human person as a knowing subject (see Rahner, author's introduction to *Spirit in the World*, liii). In other words, while a critique of knowledge investigates the epistemological conditions and boundaries of human understanding, a metaphysics of knowledge focuses on the *a priori* ontological structure of the human person in relation to being. Rahner's project in *Geist in Welt* is therefore a metaphysical inquiry into knowledge as something fundamentally rooted in the very constitution of the human person as a "bodily spirit" in the world (see Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 30).

the intelligible form from the phantasm—the sensory image derived from concrete, material objects by the imaginative sense—and renders it universal and intelligible. In contrast, the possible intellect is the passive, receptive faculty of the mind whose function is to receive the intelligible species that have been abstracted by the agent intellect.<sup>181</sup> According to Rahner, ‘intellect’ in the strict Thomistic sense refers primarily to the agent intellect, since it alone performs the constitutive act that makes knowledge possible: “Thomistically it is already clear that the agent intellect is the moment that pre-eminently characterises the intellect.”<sup>182</sup> The possible intellect remains entirely passive in this process, wholly dependent upon the activity of the agent intellect. Thus, Rahner underscores the essential distinction between making something intelligible (the function of the agent intellect) and grasping what has been made intelligible (the role of the possible intellect).<sup>183</sup> For Rahner, the knowability of a thing lies in its capacity to be grasped by the intellect; yet a thing is not intelligible merely because it can be known. Intelligibility, in the proper sense, refers to the intellect’s capacity to synthesize the material essence of a thing into a universal thought, a capacity that is actualized only through the operation of the agent intellect.

Knowability [*Erkennbarkeit*] in general is the being of a thing insofar as it stands open of itself to some knowledge, insofar as, of itself, it can come to exist within the region of the identity of being and knowing. Intelligibility [*Intelligibilitas*] is the knowability of an existent with respect to thought [*Denken*] as such ... and so it can owe its origin only to a spontaneous activity of thought itself, over against what is given sensibly, that is, to the agent intellect. Thus the agent intellect is introduced again and again in Thomas as the *a priori* condition, inherent in thought itself, of the possibility of something actually intelligible.<sup>184</sup>

Rahner emphasizes the primacy of the agent intellect as the essential *a priori* condition for

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181. See Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 134–35.

182. See Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 134.

183. See Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 136.

184. See Rahner, *Geist in Welt*, 111; *Spirit in the World*, 136.

the possibility of intelligibility. While sensory forms (phantasms) are potentially knowable, they are not intelligible in themselves, as they remain particular and materially conditioned. Only through the active operation of the agent intellect, which abstracts the universal form from these phantasms of the imagination, can thought attain true intelligibility. For Rahner, this process cannot be reduced to the passive reception of intelligibility by the possible intellect; rather, it constitutes an essential activity of the agent intellect itself, which synthesizes the material phantasm into a universal, intelligible essence, received by the possible intellect.

Rahner, following St. Thomas, holds that intellectual knowledge always begins with sensibility, since the intellect knows only through contact with concrete, material being. Things become intelligible in proportion to their degree of intensity of being (*Seinsmächtigkeit*); the simpler a being, or the less matter it possesses, the more intelligible it becomes.<sup>185</sup> Matter, as the principle of individuation, differentiates one being from another, and is therefore less intelligible than a universal essence, which can be predicated of multiple beings simultaneously. This is because what is present in the human intellect as a universal essence is not the material being itself as it exists in the world, but the intelligible form or thought of the being as it is in the intellect.<sup>186</sup>

Without prior contact with sensory phantasms of material objects in the world, the intellect cannot attain intelligibility.<sup>187</sup> This insight is central to Rahner's interpretation of St. Thomas' metaphysics of knowledge, which affirms the centrality and indispensability of the material world as the necessary point of departure for intellectual knowledge.<sup>188</sup> For Rahner,

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185. See Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 68–69; 94–95. For Rahner, the proper function of the human intellect is to make things intelligible, and the agent intellect is responsible for this task.

186. See Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 136–37.

187. See Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 138–40.

188. Notice how Rahner's metaphysical starting point diverges from that of Rousselot and Maréchal in his Thomistic interpretation of knowledge. Whereas Rousselot and Maréchal begin with the divine intellect as

every act of knowing in the human intellect is always a knowing of a concrete, material being situated in the real world.<sup>189</sup> The general term Rahner employs, following St. Thomas, to describe this concrete foundation of all human knowing is “sensibility.” Accordingly, intellectual knowledge is always knowledge of sensibility.

Rahner defines sensibility as the concrete ground of intellectual knowledge—the actual being-in-itself (*Wirklichsein*) to which the agent intellect must conform to attain intelligibility.<sup>190</sup> This concrete, material form of being in the world must be distinguished from the universal form of the same being as it exists in the intellect. However, Rahner emphasizes that the material being given in sensibility and the intelligible, universal form in the intellect are not two separate realities. While the material form of being in sensibility can be distinguished from its universal form in a thought or concept, they do not constitute ontologically distinct entities.

Rahner conceives intellect and sensibility in a dialectical “original unity,” in which being and the knowledge of being are fundamentally one. Concrete being in the world is intelligible precisely because it is known by the intellect, and the intellect cannot know anything unless it first exists concretely in sensibility.<sup>191</sup> Rahner describes this dialectical mutuality between intellect and sensibility as an “original unity” (*eine ursprüngliche Einheit*).<sup>192</sup> In Rahner’s Thomistic interpretation, this concept of original unity reveals that being (sensibility) and the knowledge of being (intellect) are not two separate realities, but

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the proper object of intellectual knowledge—the knowledge of divine truth in which the human intellect participates—Rahner grounds his interpretation of Thomistic metaphysics of knowledge not in the divine intellect, but in the finite experience of material being in the world.

189. See Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 147.

190. See Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 142.

191. See Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 68.

192. For further discussion, see Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 68–77.

fundamentally one:

Thus being and knowing exist in an original unity. Knowing does not come upon its object by chance. Thomas explicitly rejects the common conception of knowing as a coming upon something. Knowing does not come about ‘through a contact of the intellect with the intelligible thing,’ but being and knowing are the same: ‘the intellect and the known and the knowing are the same.’ Knowing is the being-present-to-self of being, and this being-present-to-self is the being of the existent” (*Erkennen ist Beisichsein des Seins, und dieses Beisichsein ist das Sein des Seinden*).<sup>193</sup>

In this light, intellect and sensibility are not identical, but they are grounded in an “original unity” and are therefore inseparable. Being, as it exists in sensibility, and the knowledge of being, as rendered intelligible by the light of the intellect, are ontologically one and the same reality. Knowing does not occur through an external contact with an object in the world, but through an inner identity in which being becomes present to itself—that is, conscious of itself as something known through the intellect. Thus, knowing is the self-consciousness of being in the intellect, and this self-consciousness constitutes the very act of existence of the being as it is in the world.

Rahner presents the relationship between sensibility and intellect in human knowing as a nuanced unity, in which sensibility becomes objective only through the activity of the intellect. Objective knowledge is always the knowledge of sensibility—that is, the knowledge of being as it exists concretely in the real world (*Realsein*). While sensibility may be considered a form of knowing—inasmuch as what is known is a reality existing in-itself—this knowing is always mediated through an “other,” namely the intellect. Sensibility, therefore, exists “in-itself” (*Ansich*) only through being-with-another: “being-away-from-self-with-the-other (*Weg-von-sich-beim andern-Sein*).”<sup>194</sup> As such, sensibility, while it manifests the self-presence of being as it is in-itself, does not possess intelligibility or

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193. Rahner, *Geist in Welt*, 62; *Spirit in the World*, 69.

194. See Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 46, 81.

knowledge of itself; its self-presence is a being away from self to be present-with-another, namely, the intellect which renders it intelligible. Thus, the transition from sensibility to intelligibility occurs only through the activity of the agent intellect, which liberates sensibility from the immediacy of sense experience and reflects upon its intelligibility. This reflective movement (from sensibility to intelligibility) in which the intellect returns to the “whither” (*Wohin*) of sense experience (sensibility) and renders it conceptually intelligible, constitutes the objective act of knowledge.<sup>195</sup> In this way, sensibility and intellect form a unified structure of human cognition: together, they constitute the one, human, objective intuition of the world in space and time. As Rahner explains:

But insofar as sensibility as ‘knowing’ expresses a being-with-self, the being-with-self of sensibility would be being-with-another. Insofar as sensibility itself cannot set itself over against that which it always is as intuition, it would indeed be intuition, since it is identical with the other, but it would not be objective intuition. The objectification [*Die Vergegenständlichung*] of that into which sensibility loses itself, which comes about through a self-liberation from sensibility and by referring the knowledge brought along in the liberation back to the ‘whither’ given in sensibility, would then be the accomplishment of the intellect. Sensibility and intellect together would then form the one, human, objective intuition of the world in space and time.<sup>196</sup>

There is a dialectical relationship between intellect and sensibility—each can only be understood in and through the other. This “original unity” between intellect and sensibility means that they are interdependent and mutually conditioning: sensibility provides the concrete ground of all knowledge, while the intellect actualizes its intelligibility through reflective abstraction.

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195. The “whither” (*Wohin*) of sense experience refers to the implicit orientation or goal towards which sensibility is directed—namely, the hidden intelligibility within concrete reality. Thus, when the intellect returns to the “whither” of sensibility, it reflects upon the original direction latent in sensory experience in order to draw out its universal meaning and render it intelligible. Yet even as the intellect actualizes this intelligibility, the concrete sense experience remains the indispensable ground from which all knowledge arises and to which all thought remains anchored. In other words, sensibility is intelligible in itself, but it requires an “other”—the light of the intellect—to bring its latent intelligibility to full expression. As pure intuition, sensibility is actualized only through the illuminating activity of the agent intellect. For further discussion, see Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 103–06.

196. Rahner, *Geist in Welt*, 45; *Spirit in the World*, 46.

For Rahner, sensibility is the concrete ground of being, and the intellect the light that renders it intelligible—together forming an inseparable unity grounded in the concrete human subject. Rahner describes this unity of intellect and sensibility as a “union between intellect and body”—*Verbindung zwischen Intellekt und Leib*.<sup>197</sup> Here, he interprets sensibility through the lens of human bodiliness. It must be reiterated that, as far as human knowledge is concerned, ‘intellect’ and ‘sensibility’ cannot be separated from each other, since they constitute an original unity. The intellect can only know because it is inseparably united with a material body—the concretely embodied human subject in the world—as the ground of its knowledge. He states:

It is not as though an intellect knew a universal quiddity first, and then afterwards turned to sensibility to further complete this knowledge. ... It follows just from this that in Thomas there is question essentially of one human knowledge whose two roots ought not to be made independent as two cognitive powers complete in themselves. It follows, moreover, that for Thomas what is known first is the concrete individual [*das Ersterkannte das konkrete Einzelne ist*]. Hence in Thomas there can only be question, not of explaining a subsequent collaboration of two independent cognitive powers, but of understanding the one human knowledge from this one ground in its unity and in the duality of its roots.<sup>198</sup>

What is first known by the human intellect is the concrete individual—the ground of sensibility.<sup>199</sup> In this sense, Rahner discusses sensibility as the pure intuition of the intellect and links it to the radical openness of human nature to being in general.<sup>200</sup>

For Rahner, the unity of intellect and sensibility is foundational to a metaphysics of being, grounding knowledge in the embodied existence of the human person. A metaphysics of being is concerned not merely with the cognitive process of human knowing, but with the

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197. Rahner, *Geist in Welt*, 41; *Spirit in the World*, 39.

198. Rahner, *Geist in Welt*, 46–47; *Spirit in the World*, 47–48.

199. See also George Vass, *A Theologian in Search of a Philosophy: Understanding Karl Rahner, Volume I* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1985), 48.

200. The radical openness of human nature to being in general is expressed in Rahner’s concept of the *Vorgriff auf esse*, which he defines as a “pre-anticipatory grasp” embedded in human nature as an a priori ontological structure. See Rahner, *Geist in Welt*, 87; *Spirit in the World*, 103.

ontological structure of the human person as a knowing subject in the world. By emphasizing the inseparable unity of intellect and sensibility, Rahner argues that intellectual knowledge is not an abstract grasp of universal concepts isolated from lived human experience, but rather a concrete act of self-presence grounded in the human person's embodied existence in the world—sensibility.

Sensibility is not a passive receptacle of matter but the bodily ground that impresses itself upon the intellect, which in turn renders it intelligible. This reaffirms the fundamental Thomistic insight that knowledge is an original unity of intellect and sensibility, wherein “knowing” (intellect) and “being” (sensibility) are not two distinct realities but one and the same. As Rahner states, “For Thomas, the essence of the human intellect is to be defined in light of its ‘being united with a passible body’ [*Für Thomas das Wesen des menschlichen Intellekts bestimmen sein soll von dem ‘conjungi passibili corpori’*]”.<sup>201</sup> In other words, human knowledge is never pure thought detached from the body, but always emerges from the union of the intellect with the concrete, bodily reality of the human subject in the world. In this view, bodiliness is not merely the raw material of knowledge but its indispensable receptive ground, just as the intellect is not merely a passive receiver of a passible body but the power that actualizes it and renders it intelligible. In this unity, to know is to be, and to be is to be known.<sup>202</sup>

For Rahner, the unity of intellect and sensibility is a single metaphysical event in which knowing and being coincide, grounded in the material dimension of human existence. This unity reveals that human knowing is fundamentally grounded in the concrete world, where the intellect's capacity to know is always mediated through its unity with a material body—a unity expressed concretely in the human person, “with his bodiliness and with all

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201. Rahner, *Geist in Welt*, 39.

202. See Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 68–69. See also Fiorenza, Introduction to *Spirit in the World*, xlii.

that belongs to the realm and to the environment of this bodily life” (“*er selbst mit seiner Leiblichkeit mit allem, was zum Raum und zur Umwelt dieses leiblichen Lebens gehört*”).<sup>203</sup>

### 3.1.2. Knowledge as the Unity of Spirit and Body

Rahner regards the “union” [*Einheit*] of intellect (spirit) and sensibility (body) as essential to knowledge, yet questions how this union accounts for intuitive cognition that transcends concrete, sensible reality. The unity of spirit and body is both a conceptual and existential unity grounded in concrete human experience. However, further clarification is required when applying this understanding to forms of knowledge such as intuitive cognition, which is beyond sensory experience. A difficulty arises within this understanding. Rahner poses a critical question: “For how can a ‘union’ between intellect and body, however it is conceived, give us an insight into the fact that the only object which the intellect can reach in an original intuition is something [material]?”<sup>204</sup> In other words, if the intellect knows only the universal concept of being abstracted from phantasms of material things in the world, how can it also have a direct intuition of reality that transcends the material and sensible world itself? This dilemma touches the core of Thomistic epistemology: if knowledge is defined as the conformity between intellect and sensibility, then positing a knowing of reality beyond sensibility would seem to contradict the very essence of knowledge as *adaequatio intellectus et rei*. Rahner reframes the dilemma as follows:

But these preliminary conjectures (“the idea of an intellect which has its intuition in itself and from itself alone) seem to have brought us into a fundamental dilemma which refutes our own position (the position that for St. Thomas, the human intellect is to be defined in light of its ‘being united with [a passible body],’ (*qui est conjunctus corpori passibili*) which is expressed in the conversion of the intellect to the phantasm, that is, in turning to the imagination as the only and the necessary human intuition). How is human knowledge to transcend its own boundary, namely, that of the imagination, which is its only intuition [*Anschauung*], without a direct view beyond the imagination, without an

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203. Rahner, *Geist in Welt*, 58; *Spirit in the World*, 62.

204. Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 39.

intellectual intuition?<sup>205</sup>

The key issue here concerns the apparent tension between the Thomistic view that human knowledge necessarily arises through the imagination—understood as the only and necessary form of human intuition—and the suggestion that the intellect can somehow transcend this imaginative boundary. According to St. Thomas, as interpreted by Rahner, the human intellect is essentially united with the body and must always return to material phantasms in order to know. This means that all intellectual knowledge is grounded in concrete, sensory experience. However, if the intellect is capable of knowing realities that lie beyond the reach of the imagination—without any corresponding sensory phantasm—then this would seem to imply the existence of a direct intellectual intuition. Such a view risks undermining the Thomistic principle that knowledge is always a unity of intellect and sensibility. The fundamental dilemma, therefore, is whether the intellect can truly know anything beyond what is given in the imagination without contradicting the very structure of human knowing as embodied, sensate, and conditioned by concrete experience.

Rahner resolves this dilemma by situating intuition (*Intuition*) and imagination (*Einbildungskraft*) within the inseparable unity of intellect and sensibility in human knowing. While a Thomistic distinction exists between intuition and imagination, Rahner argues that both must be understood as essentially unified within the single structure of human knowledge.<sup>206</sup> In his interpretation, the distinction between intuition and imagination must be situated within the inseparable relationship of intellect and sensibility. Although St. Thomas affirms that the human person possesses a separate kind of intuition, this must not be construed as an independent act of intellectual knowledge that bypasses the imagination or sensory mediation (*sensorium*). Rather, intellectual intuition is the intuition of sensibility

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205. Rahner, *Geist in Welt*, 40; *Spirit in the World*, 38.

206. See Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 26–27.

itself—an act grounded in the *a priori* structure of the human person as an embodied spirit-in-world.<sup>207</sup> In this context, intellectual intuition refers to a mode of knowledge that remains mediated through the imagination, understood broadly as the faculty by which sensible images (*phantasmata*) are retained and made available for intellectual abstraction and judgement.

For Rahner, abstraction and judgement are integral to human intuition, enabling it to yield objective knowledge and orient the mind beyond the sensible world towards the fullness of being.<sup>208</sup> Through the unity of abstraction, judgement, and imagination, the human person intuits the world not merely as an object in sensibility but as something already transcended towards the fullness of being beyond the world:

Abstraction [*die Abstraktion*] and judgment [*das Urteil*] are the intrinsic, constitutive elements for the fact that the imagination [*die Imagination*] realizes itself as a power springing from the human spirit and remaining in it: as *objective* intuition of the world, in which the world as object (able to be set off and seen beyond) is already transcended in the *excessus* towards being as such (in accordance with the fundamental characteristic of Thomistic knowing. . . . The only intuition which apprehends its object immediately in its own self is sense intuition, imagination in the broader sense.<sup>209</sup>

For Rahner, human knowing is always a single, dynamic metaphysical act in which intuition does not stand apart from the imagination but realizes its transcendental openness precisely in and through it: “the only intuition which apprehends its object immediately in its own self is

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207. See also Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 305–06. Here, Rahner addresses certain challenges that Kantian philosophy poses to the Thomistic metaphysics of knowledge. In his *Critique*, Kant explores the roles of the imagination (*Einbildungskraft*) and intellectual understanding (*Verstand*), underlining their centrality in shaping human experience and perception of reality. According to Kant, intellectual knowledge is made possible by what is given through the pure forms of intuition (the *a priori* structures of space and time) which are then shaped by the imagination through the synthesis of sensory data and ordered by the understanding according to its *a priori* categories of quantity, quality, relation, and modality. In *Geist in Welt*, Rahner engages critically with this Kantian framework but emphasizes the indispensability of receptive bodiliness—the concrete, sensuous dimension of human existence in the world (sensibility)—as the condition for the possibility of intellectual knowledge. For Rahner, the human intellect does not function independently but is always already embodied in sensibility, thus reaffirming the Thomistic conviction that all knowledge begins with material reality as encountered in the world.

208 See Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 26.

209 Rahner, *Geist in Welt*, 31; *Spirit in the World*, 26.

sense intuition, imagination in the broader sense.”<sup>210</sup> In the strict Thomistic sense, pure intellectual intuition is non-existent, as it would lack the material grounding that constitutes the condition of possibility (*Bedingung der Möglichkeit*) for transcendental openness (*excessus*) towards being as such.

### 3.2. The *Conversio ad Phantasma*: Knowledge Grounded in Bodiliness

This section examines Rahner’s Thomistic epistemology as a decisive affirmation of intellectual knowledge as concretely embodied. According to Rahner, the human intellect does not possess innate, *a priori* knowledge of being. Rather, it arrives at a universal, immaterial, and necessary grasp of being only through its concrete union with sensibility—that is, through the embodied conditions of human existence. To develop this argument, the section will explore two key themes: (1) the *conversio ad phantasma* as intellectual unity, and (2) actual knowledge as the completion of the *conversio*.

#### 3.2.1. Conversion as the Integration of Intellect and Sensibility

The *conversio ad phantasma* (“conversion to the phantasm”) is central to Rahner’s metaphysics of knowledge, expressing the unity of intellect and sensibility as the source of all human knowing. It refers to the “return” or turning of the human intellect towards the material world (sensibility), which functions both as the source and object of all human knowledge.<sup>211</sup> To understand Rahner’s interpretation of the *conversio*, it must be situated within the broader Thomistic framework of intellectual knowledge as the conformity (*adaequatio*) of universal intellectual concepts in the mind to particular realities in the concrete world.<sup>212</sup> In Rahner’s view, the *conversio* addresses the essential unity of human

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210. See Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 27.

211. See Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 119, and Vorgrimler, *Understanding Karl Rahner*, 59.

212. According to Rahner, St. Thomas introduces the concept of *conversio ad phantasma* to explain the

knowledge, in which the intellect's universal concepts of being are always constituted in relation to particular, sensible realities in the world. The *conversio ad phantasma* thus expresses the principle that every conceptual knowledge of being originates from a unity between the intellect and a sensory phantasm retained in the imagination.

In Rahner's Thomistic view, all intellectual knowledge, though immaterial and universal, is grounded in material phantasms of concrete objects and mediated through sensibility.<sup>213</sup> There is no knowledge in the intellect that does not originate from the material phantasms of concrete objects, retained in the immediate grasp of the imagination. All intellectual experience is mediated in and through the world of sensibility. However, one must not misunderstand this to mean that knowledge is first acquired in sensibility and then subsequently transferred to the intellect. According to Rahner, the cognitive faculties—the senses and the intellect—do not themselves know. Rather, it is the one concrete, embodied human person who knows through these faculties:

The misunderstanding must again be avoided that in abstraction in Thomas there is question of transferring a content of knowledge from one cognitive faculty to another. It is the one man who knows the contents of his cognitive faculties [*Der eine Mensch ist es, der vom Inhalt seiner Erkenntnisfähigkeiten weiß*], and it is therefore senseless to have him know something twice in two cognitive faculties.<sup>214</sup>

From the very beginning, it is important to clarify that the *conversio ad phantasma* is not a rational process by which the intellect chooses to engage the sensory phantasms of the imagination. Strictly speaking, neither the intellect nor the senses know in themselves.

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relationship between universals and particulars concerning human knowledge. He states: '*Et ideo necesse est ad hoc quod intellectus actu intelligat suum objectum proprium, quod convertat se ad phantasmata, ut speculetur naturam universalem in particulari existentem*' (STh I, q.84, a.8); 'Therefore, for the actual knowledge of the object which belongs properly to it, the intellect must turn to the phantasms, in order (thus) to look at the universal essence as existing in the individual thing' (see Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 9).

213. Rahner states: "Man is in possession of an 'immaterial, universal, and necessary knowledge.' This is the first great starting point which St. Thomas posits along with every great philosophy from that of the Greeks until Hegel: absolute knowledge is a reality in man; it is true: the form of the thing known is in the intellect universally, immaterially, and immutably" (Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 18–19).

214. Rahner *Geist in Welt*, 164; *Spirit in the World*, 200–02.

Knowledge belongs to the one embodied human person in the world. The *conversio* is the act of this unified, concrete subject—the one human knower—through whom both intellect and sensibility are actualized in a single act of knowing.

Rahner holds that the agent intellect actively abstracts universal concepts of being from sensory phantasms, a process central to his Thomistic metaphysics in *Geist in Welt*. The agent intellect possesses an active capacity to form intelligible, universal concepts of being from the sensory phantasms retained in the imagination, through its power of abstraction. This activity shapes the very structure of human experience and knowledge of the world.<sup>215</sup> The Aristotelian-Thomistic concept of universals is fundamental to Rahner's metaphysics in *Geist in Welt*. Following St. Thomas, Rahner defines a universal as a general, immaterial, and necessary concept of being in the intellect that can be predicated of one or more particular beings in the concrete world simultaneously.<sup>216</sup> For any concept of being in the intellect to qualify as a universal in the proper Thomistic sense, it must be predicable of an actual, concrete being in the real world. This distinction implies that, while every phantasm is graspable by the imaginative sense, not every concept generated by the imagination is an

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215. There is a common ground between Rahner and Kant regarding the role of the intellect in shaping human knowledge and experience of the world. Both thinkers recognise that the intellect is not passive but actively engaged in the process of knowing. However, the fundamental difference between their perspectives lies in how each conceives the nature of the intellect's role. Kant asserts that the intellect's intuitive and imaginative capacities autonomously shape how humans experience and understand the world. For him, concrete reality as it is cannot be known. All human knowledge begins and ends within the pure forms of intuition—time and space—which are structured by the imagination and governed by the categories of the understanding. In other words, the intellect does not know the “thing-in-itself” (*Ding an sich*) as it exists independently in the world, but only as it appears within the conditions of human intuition and imagination. By contrast, Rahner argues that knowledge arises from the unity of intellect and sensibility. The intellect does not autonomously impose meaning or shape human understanding from within itself. Rather, it knows the world because it is always already ontologically united with receptive bodiliness—sensibility. Knowledge is not merely an intellectual projection of meaning onto the world, but the concrete and dynamic unity of a knower (intellect) and a known (body). Thus, while Kant emphasizes the autonomy of the intellect in structuring human knowledge and experience of the world, Rahner insists on a reciprocal relationship—an original unity—between intellect and receptive bodiliness. For Rahner, knowledge is not merely a mental construct generated within the intellect. The intellect must engage with sensibility—that is, with its concrete conditions of embodied existence. This original unity between intellect and sensibility constitutes the foundation of Rahner's Thomistic interpretation of human knowledge.

216. See Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 120.

intelligible universal.<sup>217</sup> For example, through the immediate grasp of the imagination, the agent intellect may abstract the idea of a mythical creature such as Pegasus—derived from the combined essences of a horse and a bird. Although Pegasus is an intellectual concept, it does not qualify as an intelligible universal in the strict Thomistic sense, since it cannot be predicated of any real material being in the world. Pegasus, in this sense, is a transcendental concept of human intuition, rather than a universal concept of actual knowledge.

Following St. Thomas, Rahner holds that while the imagination can generate countless concepts of being, only those predicable of concrete realities qualify as true universals. Through the creative imagination of the senses (sensibility), the human mind is capable of generating innumerable universal concepts of being—“the multiple same.”<sup>218</sup> However, only those concepts that can be predicated of particular beings in the concrete world qualify as intelligible universals in the true Thomistic sense. Universals, therefore, represent the highest form of knowledge, which reaches completion in a judgement—an abstractive act of the agent intellect by which the intellect affirms the unity of concept and reality in a *conversio*.<sup>219</sup>

The *conversio ad phantasma* expresses the Thomistic principle that all intellectual knowledge returns to sensibility, a movement Rahner sees completed in a universal judgement. Every instance of human judgement thus serves as evidence that both abstraction and *conversio* have already taken place—because, in Rahner’s view, intellect and being are fundamentally one and the same.<sup>220</sup> Technically, “abstraction” and “conversion” are not two distinct processes. Since there is only one unified act of human knowing, the *conversio* is

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217. See Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 234–35.

218. See Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 102.

219. See Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 208.

220. See Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 268–69, 403–04.

always already implied in every act of intellectual abstraction from sensibility.

Rahner describes a dialectical relationship between intellect and sensibility, where each is both the ground and the origin of the other. Sensibility is the ground of all intellectual knowing, yet it remains unknowable unless its knowability is actualized by the agent intellect. In this sense, sensibility is the ground of the intellect, and the intellect is likewise the origin of sensibility.<sup>221</sup> As Rahner explains, “Being-present-to-oneself and abstraction are intrinsically and essentially a knowing-some-thing-of-another, and therefore are already themselves a conversion to the phantasm.”<sup>222</sup> To clarify further, he writes:

The conversion to the phantasm is nothing other than the illumination of the phantasm by the light of the agent intellect, through which illumination the abstraction is already accomplished. *Conversion to the phantasm and abstraction are moments of a single process and are inseparably related to each other in a relationship of reciprocal priority.* Insofar as abstraction is conceivable only in a “penetration” of the light of the agent intellect “into” the phantasm, the conversion is logically prior to the abstraction; insofar as the conversion as a conscious, spiritual process already presupposes a spiritual knowing, hence an abstraction, the abstraction is prior to the conversion. So it was not surprising that the problematic of abstraction and of the abstractive complete return became the question about the conversion to the phantasm. Both require an understanding of the relationship of spirit [intellect] and sensibility.<sup>223</sup>

Rahner interprets the *conversio* of the intellect to the phantasm of sensibility as a mutually interdependent process, in which the agent intellect abstracts or illuminates the sensory phantasm—from the immediate grasp of material objects by the imaginative sense—into intelligible, universal concepts. This dynamic interplay between *conversio* and abstraction expresses the inseparable unity of intellect and sensibility in all human knowing:

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221. See Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 264–66. Drawing on *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 77, a. 7, Rahner asserts that the “origin of sensibility from the intellect must now be further understood explicitly as the real conversion to the phantasm.”

222. Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 238.

223. Rahner, *Geist in Welt*, 199; *Spirit in the World*, 266.

“Abstraction and conversion are two sides of the one process. Abstraction comes about insofar as a conversion of the *a priori* structure of the spirit [i.e. the intellect] to sensibility takes place.”<sup>224</sup>

In Rahner’s account, the *conversio ad phantasma* safeguards the Thomistic conviction that all knowledge is at once spiritual and embodied. Intellectual knowing is never an autonomous activity of the mind detached from the senses, but the single act of the concrete, embodied subject in which “spirit” (intellect) and “world” (sensibility) are reciprocally grounded. By framing abstraction (*abstractio*) and conversion (*conversio*) as inseparable moments of the one process of human knowing, Rahner shows that the intellect’s openness to being is always mediated through, and fulfilled in, its engagement with the material or bodily world of sensibility.

### 3.2.2. Actual Knowledge as the Fulfilment of Conversion

Building on his integration of intellect and sensibility, Rahner turns to the Thomistic *conversio ad phantasma* to distinguish actual knowledge, grounded in embodied reality, from merely possible knowledge, which remains abstract and incomplete. Following St. Thomas, Rahner contrasts actual knowledge, possessed by the agent intellect, with possible knowledge, which belongs to the imaginative sense. Actual knowledge, for Rahner, indicates that the *conversio* has been fully realized as a unity of intellect and sensibility. By contrast, possible knowledge does not signify this completion.<sup>225</sup> It represents a disembodied understanding of the intellect, detached from concrete reality in the world—as in the example of a mythical Pegasus. Rahner therefore contends that possible knowledge is not “knowledge” in the actual Thomistic sense. Although St. Thomas does not systematically

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224. Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 278.

225. For further discussion, see Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 162–65. In other words, possible knowledge remains incomplete, since it lacks grounding in concrete, embodied experience.

distinguish between actual and possible knowledge, Rahner argues that, for Thomas, possible knowledge is only the condition of the possibility of actual knowledge.<sup>226</sup> He writes:

For Thomas, knowledge appears from the outset as attaining to the things of the real world, and he sees no reason to extend the in-itself [*Ansich*] of the real world of objects by an ideal in-itself which is in principle independent of this world. That, however, the objects of possible knowledge existing in themselves [*die an sich seienden Gegenstände möglicher Erkenntnis*] do not coincide simply and absolutely with the in-itself of the spatial and temporal world follows for Thomas not from the fact that human knowing attains to an ideal in-itself as to a realm of objects coordinate to the real world and apprehended with equal primacy, but only from the fact that the affirmation of a real and yet not worldly in-itself belongs to the conditions of the possibility of knowing the real, worldly in-itself.<sup>227</sup>

Rahner critiques any notion that treats human knowledge as purely intellectual, disconnected from the world. Even if St. Thomas were to grant some legitimacy to possible knowledge, Rahner argues that it would still have to be grounded in the concrete material world, which alone provides the metaphysical foundation for intellectual knowing. Actual knowledge, for both Rahner and St. Thomas, necessarily entails a *conversio*—a return of the intellect to the world of the imagination (sensibility), by which universal concepts are grounded, validated, and rendered truly intelligible in concrete reality.

Rahner interprets the *conversio ad phantasma* as a metaphysical dynamic in which the intellect's engagement with the material world grounds human knowing in bodiliness while simultaneously opening it to an *excessus*—a transcendental knowing that exceeds knowledge of the world itself. In Rahner's view, the *conversio ad phantasma* is not merely a rational process within the human mind, but an active metaphysics of being, in which the intellect engages (through abstraction) and re-engages (through conversion) with the material world in order to arrive at complete knowledge—a universal judgement of being. Through the *conversio*, the intellect remains grounded in the concrete material world as the “spiritual

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226. See Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 165.

227. Rahner, *Geist in Welt*, 131–32; *Spirit in the World*, 165–66.

power” (*Geist*) of the human subject, who experiences the world in and through their bodiliness. While rooted in this unity of intellect and sensibility, the human spirit is capable of a direct intuition of the world that simultaneously reaches towards transcendental realities beyond it. The *conversio* reveals that although human beings remain anchored in the bodily dimension of existence, they are always already open to a metaphysical awareness that transcends the world.<sup>228</sup> In Rahner’s understanding, human bodiliness—as revealed through the *conversio*—is always, at the same time, a metaphysical openness to being that reaches beyond the immediate experience of the material world.

### 3.3. The Metaphysical Structure of Human Knowing

This section examines Rahner’s account of the structure of human knowing in the world within a broader metaphysical framework shaped by the concepts of “questionability” and “trans-categorical” unity. The human person is, by its very nature, a question—one that seeks knowledge within the world and, through that very search, finds itself simultaneously oriented towards the infinite mystery of God that transcends the world. This section will explore Rahner’s position by considering two key themes: (1) knowledge as “questionability” and (2) knowledge as a “trans-categorical unity.”

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228. Rahner’s use of the term transcendental (*transzendental*) is rooted within a Thomistic framework, particularly in relation to the intellectual soul’s capacity to attain knowledge of material objects (see *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 84, a.1). This stands in contrast to the original Kantian meaning of the term. In Rahner’s philosophy, transcendental knowledge refers to the dynamic process by which the agent intellect moves from mere knowability—that is, from unconscious abstraction—to intelligibility, the formation of universal concepts that transcend the immediate intuition of the imaginative sense. This enables the human person not only to engage with the sensory world but also to transcend it, arriving at a deeper, metaphysical understanding of being itself. For Rahner, transcendental knowledge is grounded in the intellect’s innate orientation towards being. It reflects the *a priori* anticipatory openness of the human spirit to being in general—not only to the material phantasms of the imagination but also to the intelligible meaning that surpasses them. In this sense, transcendental knowledge is both a movement through the bodily senses and beyond it. By contrast, Kantian transcendental knowledge focuses on the intellectual processes and *a priori* structures of the mind that condition human experience. For Kant, the transcendental refers to the inherent categories of the intellect and pure forms of intuition—such as space and time—that shape and make possible all human perception and understanding. Kant’s transcendental philosophy does not describe a movement from sense to intelligibility; rather, it examines the necessary preconditions for any experience or knowledge to occur, emphasising the autonomy of the intellect in shaping the world of human experience.

### 3.3.1. *Fragbarkeit*: Human Existence as Radical Questionability

Developing his metaphysical epistemology, Rahner describes intellectual knowledge as a state of radical questionability (*Fragbarkeit*), where the human inquiry into being-in-itself is seen as both arising within and reaching beyond the world.<sup>229</sup> In *Geist in Welt*, intellectual knowledge is understood as a human question about being in the world. It is concerned with knowing being-in-itself as it exists in unity with the “world” of sensibility. For Rahner, being-in-the-world (*in-der-Welt-Sein*) is always a metaphysical question that must be asked in order for any knowledge of being to occur.<sup>230</sup> By posing the question “What is being-in-itself?”, one is simultaneously drawn into a transcendental experience of being beyond the world:

The metaphysical question as transcendental question [*Die metaphysische Frage als transzendente Frage*] is this pervasive question about being itself raised to conceptual form. In actually asking the metaphysical question man becomes aware of what he is in the ground of his essence: he who must ask about being.<sup>231</sup>

The very act of asking about being in the world already presupposes a transcendental experience of being oriented towards what exceeds the immediate experience of being in the world. In this context, being is always encountered concretely in the world, yet precisely as something that surpasses the world—because it is a question that must arise within the world, even though it cannot be fully answered by the world.<sup>232</sup>

For Rahner, the question of being arises from the human person’s embodied existence, such that the act of knowing is inseparable from the existential reality of the one

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229. Questionability (*Fragbarkeit*) must not be confused with skepticism, cynicism, or disbelief. Rather, it is the transcendental condition of human openness to being.

230. See Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 57–58.

231. Rahner, *Geist in Welt*, 55; *Spirit in the world*, 57–58.

232. For further discussion, see Rahner, *Spirit in the world*, 57–61. See also Vass, *A Theologian in Search of a Philosophy*, 35.

who must ask about being. According to him, it is the human person in their concrete, material embeddedness in the world (*Leiblichkeit*) who poses the question, “What is being?” In raising this question, the inquiry into being simultaneously becomes a metaphysical inquiry into the nature or essence of the human person. To know is to exist as one who must ask about being, because being itself is given only in and through the act of questioning: “The being that is questioned is at once the being of the question and of the one questioning.”<sup>233</sup>

Rahner identifies radical questionability (*Fragbarkeit*) as the metaphysical essence of the human person, an irreducible openness to being that necessarily orients the human person towards Absolute Being. Since the question of being cannot be fully exhausted by human reasoning, Rahner contends that the metaphysical essence of the human person is *Fragbarkeit*—radical questionability. This denotes a constitutive openness to being that admits no final or exhaustive answer. The human subject exists as a question of being oriented beyond being in the world. It is precisely this unresolvable questionability that discloses the person’s transcendental structure, as an “open system” oriented towards God or the Absolute Being.

MAN questions. This is something final and irreducible. For in human existence the question is that fact which absolutely refuses to be replaced by another fact, to be reduced back to another fact and thus to be unmasked once again as being itself derivative and provisional. For every placing-in-question of the question is itself again asking a question, and thereby a new instance of the question itself. So the question is first of all the only “must,” the only necessity, the only thing beyond question to which questioning man is bound, the only circle in which his questioning is caught, the only apriority to which it is subject. Man questions necessarily.<sup>234</sup>

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233. Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 59.

234. Rahner, *Geist in Welt*, 54; *Spirit in the World*, 57. Rahner capitalizes “MAN” to emphasize that the human person—understood as concretely embodied spirit—is the subject of the metaphysical question of being. This question, though essentially intellectual, is nevertheless grounded in the existential dimension of human existence in the world. In this context, the human person emerges as the concrete existential realization of the original unity of intellect and sensibility.

Rahner characterises the human being as a question—not merely one who asks questions, but one whose very existence is constituted as questionability. This existential questioning is irreducible and inescapable: even when one attempts to question the question itself, the act remains a further instance of questioning. Hence, the human subject is bound by a transcendental necessity to ask about being as such.

Rahner maintains that being is given to the human person only in its inherent “questionableness” (*Fragwürdigkeit*) in which being simultaneously discloses and conceals itself through the transcendental act of questioning. The human person exists as a question about being, and in this very act of questioning, being both reveals and conceals itself:

In the being of the question, which man is (so that he needs to question) being as that which is questioned both reveals itself and at the same time conceals itself in its own questionableness [*Fragwürdigkeit*] ... it is the question turned consciously upon itself, the transcendental question, which does not merely place something asked about in question, but the one questioning and his question itself, and thereby absolutely everything.<sup>235</sup>

Being is accessible to the human person only in its *Fragwürdigkeit*—whereby it reveals itself precisely as something that cannot be fully grasped. It is given in such a way that it simultaneously discloses and conceals itself. As such, the human person is not merely the one who asks the question, but is the question itself—a transcendental question in which being becomes present to itself through the very act of questioning. In this sense, the metaphysical inquiry into being, “What is being-in-itself?”, points towards being-in-itself as a mystery of simultaneous revelation and concealment—a question that is never fully resolved in the one who asks it.

Bringing his account of *Fragbarkeit* to its ontological conclusion, Rahner recasts human knowledge as the necessary and constitutive act of questioning being in its totality—an act through which being both reveals and withholds itself. He introduces a decisive shift in

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235. Rahner, *Geist in Welt*, 54–55; *Spirit in the world*, 58.

Thomistic epistemology by reframing the question of knowledge as fundamentally ontological rather than merely cognitive. The inquiry into the nature of human knowledge becomes, for him, a question about the human person as an embodied, material subject in the world. *Fragbarkeit*, or questionability, is not an optional or replaceable feature of human existence—it is its very condition:

The proposition stating the necessity of questioning in human existence includes in itself its own ontological proposition which says: man exists as the question about being. In order to be himself he necessarily asks about being in its totality. This question is the “must” which he himself is and in which being as that which is questioned presents and offers itself, and at the same time, as that which necessarily remains in question, withdraws itself.<sup>236</sup>

The necessity of questioning discloses an ontological truth: to be human is to exist as the question addressed to being. The human person, in seeking to understand, necessarily raises the question of being in its totality. This question is not merely something humans ask; it is the “must” that constitutes their very existence. In the act of questioning, being reveals itself to the human person—but always in such a way that it simultaneously discloses and withholds itself.

Extending his ontological reframing of knowledge, Rahner presents knowing as inseparable from the human person’s concrete existence, such that every question about being presupposes an original unity between being and knowing. For Rahner, human knowledge is inseparable from the metaphysical reality of the human person as being-in-the-world. Knowledge is not merely an intellectual activity; it is a metaphysical expression of human nature itself:

There is only one knowing, in which man is himself: a knowing being-with-the-world [*ein wissendes Bei-der-Welt-Sein*]. Only here is man called into the presence of being in its totality. It is here that he carries on the business of his metaphysics. In this knowledge of the world man has already and always comprehended being in its totality when he asks about it. Hence a relationship between being and knowing is already understood simultaneously in the most

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236. Rahner, *Geist in Welt*, 54; *Spirit in the World*, 58.

general question of metaphysics.<sup>237</sup>

To know is to participate existentially in the totality of being. When the human person poses the metaphysical question “What is being?,” they have already, in that very act, grasped being in its totality in some primordial way. This is because the very structure of questioning presupposes an original unity between being and knowing. For Rahner, then, the most basic metaphysical inquiry discloses that knowledge is grounded in the ontological structure of the human subject as concretely embodied—always already situated in the world and transcendently oriented beyond it, towards the Absolute Being.

### 3.3.2. Trans-Categorical Unity: Embodied and Transcendental Knowledge

Moving from *Fragbarkeit* to the structural character of knowing, Rahner introduces trans-categorical unity to describe how every embodied act of knowledge is always already permeated by a transcendental orientation beyond finite experience. He introduces the notion of trans-categorical unity (*überkategorialer Einheit*) to articulate the convergence of the material and transcendental dimensions of knowledge in the human person as a concretely embodied subject in the world.<sup>238</sup> This concept affirms that every finite or “categorical” human experience is always already permeated by a deeper, transcendental structure—a dynamic openness to being as such that surpasses the immediacy of finite experience.<sup>239</sup> For Rahner, human knowledge cannot be reduced either to empirical data or to abstract

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237. Rahner, *Geist in Welt*, 58; *Spirit in the World*, 63.

238. Rahner employs the term “trans-categorical unity” to describe the relation between a concrete reality in the world and its conceptual *esse* in the intellect. He argues that the human person always encounters concrete reality in a way that presupposes a transcendental openness to intelligibility. In every act of knowing, reality is not only grasped as concrete but simultaneously surpassed by the intellect’s capacity to form a universal intelligible *esse* of it. This *esse*, for Rahner, grounds the possibility of experiencing being in a universal, immaterial, and necessary manner—one that exceeds the immediate grasp of the reality in space and time. For further discussion, see Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 174–83.

239. See also Richard J. Rowling, *A Philosophy of Revelation According to Karl Rahner* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1978), 16.

intellectual categories; rather, it unfolds as a unity of both: a knowledge that is at once rooted in material embodiment and irreducibly oriented towards the Absolute.<sup>240</sup>

Within this framework, categorical or categorial experience must be distinguished from transcendental experience—the *a priori* or innate structure that enables the human person to move beyond finite realities towards Absolute Being. Categorical human experience (*Erfahrung*) refers to the immediate, historically situated consciousness of particular realities in the world. By contrast, transcendental experience (*Empirie*) refers to the *a priori* ontological structure of the human subject, its inborn capacity to ask questions of meaning, truth, and being that go beyond the empirical content of experience.<sup>241</sup> It is through this transcendental structure that the human person becomes capable of knowing not only particular beings but also being as such or Absolute Being. As Rahner puts it, “transcendental *a priori* knowledge is the condition of the possibility of an articulated objective knowledge of the Absolute.”<sup>242</sup>

Rahner’s account of trans-categorical unity portrays human knowledge as the dialectical convergence of intellect and sensibility, in which the concrete human subject encounters being in its totality through an embodied engagement with the material world. Within this epistemological framework, knowledge is realized only through an intellectual encounter with, and questioning of, being as it is concretely given in the world. Following St. Thomas, Rahner insists that the human intellect cannot attain objective, universal, and necessary knowledge without turning towards the bodily phantasms of the imaginative sense. The intellect must engage concretely with material reality to actualize its cognitive potential.

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240. See Rowling, *A Philosophy of Revelation According to Karl Rahner*, 16.

241. For further discussion on the distinction between categorial and transcendental experience, see Vass, *A Theologian in Search of a Philosophy*, 23–24.

242. See Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 182–83.

As Rahner puts it, “this ‘turning to’ is essential to all knowledge; all human knowledge is also a conversion to matter, and inasmuch as this matter is accessible only in the phantasm of the human imagination, all knowledge is a conversion to the phantasm.”<sup>243</sup> Rahner thus employs the notion of trans-categorical unity to describe knowledge as the unity between the universal concept of being in the intellect and the concrete, material reality in the world to which that concept corresponds.<sup>244</sup> This unity unfolds as a dialectical interaction between intellect and sensibility, expressed in the *conversio ad phantasma*, and is completed in the act of judgement by the human person as a bodily subject who knows being in and through their existence in the world.<sup>245</sup> Therefore, every act of human knowing is already a participation in being as such, because the human knower is always with the world in a concrete, embodied manner.<sup>246</sup> It is within this trans-categorical relationship with the material world that the human person encounters being in its totality.

To sum up, Rahner’s *Geist in Welt* reinterprets Thomistic epistemology as a metaphysical account of human existence in the world. Knowledge is not a detached intellectual act but the unity of intellect (“spirit”) and sensibility (“body”), realized in the embodied subject as *Geist in Welt*—spirit whose very capacity to know presupposes its rootedness in bodiliness. The *conversio ad phantasma* demonstrates that all intellectual acts, even the most universal and immaterial, remain grounded in the sensory material world.

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243. Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 44.

244. For further discussion, see Rahner, *Geist in Welt*, 138–42; *Spirit in the World*, 174–79. This understanding of human knowledge aligns with the Thomistic concept of *adaequatio rei et intellectus*. Like Rousselot and Maréchal, Rahner treats intellectual knowledge or truth in St. Thomas as the conformity between the intellect and material being in the world.

245. See Rahner, *Geist in Welt*, 58; *Spirit in the World*, 63.

246. Cf. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A50–75, trans. Müller, 58–62. Kant argues that knowledge arises through the synthesis of sensory intuition and a priori categories of the understanding. Rahner adopts this critical insight but resists its dualistic tendency, insisting that all knowing is the act of a single, embodied subject. For Kant, space and time are pure forms of sensibility that universally structure experience; for Rahner, they are existential conditions grounded in the finite, embodied subject whose unity of intellect and sensibility makes knowledge possible.

Abstraction and conversion are not separate processes but inseparable moments of the one event of knowing, in which the human person affirms the reality of being through an embodied consciousness.

This epistemology discloses the metaphysical essence of the human being as *Fragbarkeit*—radical questionability. To exist as a knower is to exist as the question of being itself: a question that can never be exhausted, because every inquiry into being both discloses and conceals the mystery of being itself. Human knowledge is thus never reducible to the empirical or the purely conceptual. It is always trans-categorical: each finite act of knowing is already permeated by a transcendental openness towards Absolute Being. In this way, Rahner reconfigures Thomistic epistemology as more than a logical correspondence of intellect and thing: it is a bodily participation in being itself, whereby the human person, through their embodied existence, encounters being as a concrete reality. Thus, human knowing is not merely a mental correspondence (*adaequatio intellectus*) but a material or bodily participation in being as such (*et rei*).

## Chapter 4

### ***Geist in Welt: The Knowledge of Being as Bodiliness (Leiblichkeit)***

In *Geist in Welt* (1939), Rahner develops a metaphysics of consciousness (*Bewusstheit*) in dialogue with Thomistic epistemology, placing human embodiment at the centre of intellectual knowledge. He argues that knowing always arises from a conscious encounter with the concrete world. This chapter examines Rahner's interpretation of knowledge as embodied consciousness, structured by a threefold process of intellectual abstraction—qualitative, quantitative, and transcendental—whose unity is achieved in a concrete judgement. For Rahner, judgement is not a mere comparison of concepts but the original act in which the knower affirms the material being of what is known. Within this framework, knowing belongs not to the “soul” (intellect) in isolation but to the whole human person as a bodily spirit, an inseparable unity of matter and spirit.

The chapter unfolds in two sections. Section one analyses Rahner's account of intellectual consciousness, showing how knowledge originates in the dialectic of intellect and sensibility and is actualized only in a material judgement about being. Section two explores Rahner's metaphysics of *Leiblichkeit*, presenting bodiliness as the principle of subjectivity, relationality, and self-transcendence. The chapter culminates in the claim that to be human is to be *Geist in Welt*—spirit-in-world whose capacity for transcendence is realized only in and through bodily existence.

#### 4.1. Intellectual Consciousness (*Bewusstsein*) as Embodied Knowing

This section examines Rahner's account of intellectual consciousness as a mode of knowing that arises only through embodied human experience, culminating in the intellect's dynamic return to sensibility as the condition of all human knowledge. Two themes guide the analysis:

(1) the nature of intellectual consciousness and (2) the relation between knowledge and being-in-the-world.

#### 4.1.1. Consciousness as Affirmative Judgement

Rahner conceives consciousness (*das Bewusstsein*) as the act of judgement in which the unity of intellect and sensibility becomes explicit through the knower's affirmation of the known as its distinct "other." It is the intellectual affirmation of a material object (the known) by a knowing subject (the knower) in a concrete judgement.<sup>247</sup> In this relationship, the known object (sensibility) functions as the "otherness" of the knowing subject (intellect) and the knowing subject is the power by which the known object becomes intelligible. As Rahner explains, "for only if the being which becomes conscious in and through its increase in being ... is of itself in otherness [*Andersheit*] can the increase in its intensity of being, which as such is consciousness ... appear as other than the knower."<sup>248</sup> In other words, consciousness is a dynamic synthesis in which the knower (intellect) affirms the reality it knows (sensibility) as its concrete "other."<sup>249</sup> It is the original act in which concepts first appear to the intellect as its own objective self-knowledge (*eine gegenständliche Erkenntnis*).<sup>250</sup> Concepts, therefore, are not prior to consciousness but emerge within it—either as part of a judgement about real things or as objects within a judgement about other concepts:

There is no knowing by human consciousness at all except in an affirmative synthesis, and this judgment is not connecting concepts, as though these were the fundamental elements of thought and the role of judgment were only to connect them subsequently, but it is referring knowing to an in-itself [*Ansich*], and in this reference concepts are present as moments possible only in the judgment. Concepts occur either in a judgment about things, or as objects of a

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247. See also Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 125–26.

248. See Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 91.

249. See also Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 124–26. This account affirms the Thomistic thesis that in every act of knowing, sensibility (*being*) and intellect are inseparably united. The known object (that is, sensibility) constitutes the "otherness" (*Andersheit*) of the knowing subject, the intellect.

250. Rahner, *Geist in Welt*, 103–04; *Spirit in the World*, 125–26.

judgment about concepts.<sup>251</sup>

For Rahner, intellectual consciousness is identical with judgement. It occurs only through an affirmative synthesis in which the subject not merely thinks *about* something, but actively affirms the being of what is known—a reality *in-itself* (*Ansichsein*). Consciousness is therefore always an existential act of judgement, understood as the intellectual affirmation of concrete being in the world..

Intellectual consciousness is attained through a dialectical process involving three levels of abstraction within the intellect.<sup>252</sup>

#### **a. First Level Abstraction (Qualitative)**

At the first level of abstraction, Rahner shows how the intellect isolates a thing's universal essence (quiddity) from its individuality, yielding a qualitative knowledge that forms the basis of the natural sciences. The quiddity grasped at this stage is the universal quiddity of signate matter (*materia signata*)—that is, the essence as it is present in individual things and capable of being predicated of many other particular instances. As Rahner explains, this level of abstraction is “the abstraction of what is the same in many.”<sup>253</sup> For example, when one sees a red triangle, one does not merely perceive this particular triangle but also grasps what “triangle” is in general. However, for Rahner, this initial abstraction does not yet constitute the metaphysical essence or universal quiddity of a thing, such as “triangleness.” It merely reveals that properties like “redness” and “triangularity” can be found in many individual triangles. Thus, the first level of abstraction results in a qualitative

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251. Rahner, *Geist in Welt*, 103; *Spirit in the World*, 125.

252. The process of abstraction is central to Rahner's understanding of how humans acquire conscious intellectual knowledge. This knowledge is gained through a dialectical process, in which the intellect moves from grasping sensory images in the material world to forming intelligible concepts in the mind. These concepts are then applied back to material objects, enabling intellectual understanding of concrete reality. In Rahner's epistemology, abstraction refers to the intellect's ability to extract universal forms from particular sensory images (*phantasmata*) in the concrete world, in order to attain a fuller understanding of reality.

253. Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 189.

knowledge that remains oriented towards the phantasms of the imaginative sense and is always directed towards real objects in the material world.<sup>254</sup> This level, according to Rahner, forms the foundation for the natural sciences (what St. Thomas calls “physics”), which investigate the qualitative properties of beings as they appear in the physical world under the accidental conditions of matter and change.<sup>255</sup>

### **b. Second Level Abstraction (Quantitative)**

Advancing to the second level of abstraction, Rahner shows how the intellect moves beyond the qualitative features of a being to apprehend its purely quantitative structure—a progression that lays the groundwork for a specifically mathematical mode of inquiry. At this level of abstraction, the agent intellect not only bypasses the individuality of the particular thing but also sets aside its qualitative material features—such as colour, size, and shape—which were still retained at the first level. What is preserved now is its quantitative structure or intelligible matter (*materia intelligibilis*), that which can be measured, counted, or spatially determined in itself as a substance.<sup>256</sup> At this stage, abstraction shifts from the concrete and qualitative to the purely formal and quantitative. The intellect is now preoccupied with what can be expressed in mathematical or structural terms. For example, the triangle is no longer grasped as a merely visible, spatial figure, but as a set of abstract relationships between lines and angles. As Rahner explains, this level of abstraction, while still retaining a reference to real beings, focuses solely on their measurable structure—on “being as the principle of number.”<sup>257</sup> According to him, this second level of abstraction provides the basis for the quantitative sciences (what St. Thomas calls “mathematics”) which

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254. See Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 189.

255. See Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 190.

256. See Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 190.

257. See Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 190.

investigates the formal or quantitative properties of being.<sup>258</sup>

### c. Third Level Abstraction (Transcendental)

Rahner's third and highest level of abstraction directs the intellect to transcendental determinations (such as beauty, unity, and truth) that apply universally to all possible beings, material or immaterial. At this level, the intellect moves beyond both qualitative and quantitative features to transcendental determinations of being which apply not only to material or measurable things but to anything that can possibly exist, including immaterial realities.<sup>259</sup> These transcendental determinations are not simply drawn from sensory experience but represent what is universally true of every particular being of the same species. For instance, "triangleness" is not a particular triangle but the universal intelligibility of a triangle that can be predicated of every individual triangle, irrespective of colour, shape, size, or angles.

Rahner insists that even the transcendental determinations of the third level of abstraction remain grounded in sensibility, since the intellect can reach immaterial features of being only through prior engagement with material reality. As Rahner explains, the transcendental determinations always arise through an "abstraction from intelligible matter."<sup>260</sup> Because all human knowledge begins with material things in sensibility, the intellect cannot directly intuit transcendental, immaterial determinations of being without first encountering being through the senses. What occurs at this third level, rather, is a mode of thinking that recognises that certain features of being (e.g., unity or truth) do not depend essentially on matter or spatial extension.<sup>261</sup> This level of abstraction, according to Rahner,

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258. See Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 193.

259. See Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 190–91.

260. See Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 190, 200–02.

261. See Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 191–92.

corresponds to what St. Thomas calls “metaphysics.”<sup>262</sup>

Within the third level of abstraction, Rahner identifies consciousness, understood in Thomistic terms as judgement, as the act in which the knower (intellect) and the known (sensibility) are united as one, a unity that results in actual knowledge. Judgement pertains only to actual knowledge, which takes place as a conscious, objective unity of intellect and sensibility.<sup>263</sup> It is the act of distinguishing “one what” from “another what,” and occurs at this level through intellectual affirmation and negation.<sup>264</sup> Here, the agent intellect differentiates between universal concepts of actual knowledge and those of merely possible knowledge.<sup>265</sup> Actual knowledge is the knowledge of being as the unity of knower and known. At the third level of abstraction, this unity is achieved in the act of judgement, which is the ultimate goal of the *conversio ad phantasma*. Rahner explains:

Insofar as abstraction [at the third level] is conceived as taking place by the fact that the sensibly known content is informed by the light of the agent intellect, there is already included in this concept a conversion of the intellect to the phantasm as a turning of the light to what is sensibly known. With that, the abstraction as well as the conversion is already accomplished, and at one time the abstraction as such, that is, the knowledge of the *a priori* form which can be known only as united with the sensible content, and at another time the conversion to the phantasm, that is, the union of the *a priori* form with the sensible content, whereby it is by that very fact conscious, can each be correctly designated illumination.<sup>266</sup>

Third-level abstraction is always already a *conversio ad phantasma*. The intellect does not abstract knowledge purely from within itself, but attains intelligibility by turning to the phantasm—that is, by engaging the sensory images retained in the imagination. Abstraction and conversion are not two separate operations but two moments within a single act of

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262. See Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 193.

263. For further discussion, see Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 187, 201.

264. See Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 193.

265. See Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 198–99.

266. Rahner, *Geist in Welt*, 171; *Spirit in the World*, 223–24.

intellectual consciousness: the agent intellect abstracts the phantasm from the imaginative sense and gives it intelligibility. In doing so, it discovers not only the *a priori* materiality (matter) of the phantasm as given in sensibility but also its necessary union with an intelligible form in the intellect. In this way, Rahner reaffirms the core Thomistic principle that intellectual knowledge is always grounded in and through sensibility.

At every stage of abstraction (from the most immediate qualitative grasp of particulars to the highest transcendental determinations), the act of knowing, culminating in intellectual judgement, remains inseparably bound to material embodiment (sensibility). Even the most universal concepts of being arise only through the intellect's return to the phantasm, ensuring that intellectual consciousness is always mediated by sensibility. Rahner's account therefore confirms the central claim that all knowledge of being is, in essence, embodied knowledge, grounded in the concrete material reality of the world.

#### **4.1.2. Knowledge and the Experience of Being in the World**

Rahner grounds the relationship between knowledge and being in the Thomistic principle that all intellectual knowing originates in sensibility, becoming actual only when the universal concept of *esse* is united with a concrete material form in a judgement. He conceives of intellectual knowledge as a dynamic unity of *esse*—a universal concept of being in the intellect—and a material form to which this *esse* corresponds or “converts” within sensibility.<sup>267</sup> *Esse* becomes “actual knowledge” in the Thomistic sense when it can be predicated of a specific object in the material world through a conscious act of judgement, thereby establishing a reciprocal interdependence (*Beziehung*) between the universal concept in the intellect and the particular reality encountered in the concrete world.<sup>268</sup>

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267. See Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 200–01.

268. See Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 200–01.

Expanding his account of knowledge and being, Rahner presents the *conversio ad phantasma* as the act in which the universal *esse* is realized in a specific material reality, so that knowing becomes a self-aware expression of the unity between intellect and sensibility. In the *conversio*, the universal *esse* does not remain a purely intelligible concept in the mind but becomes a material *esse* (the act of being of a particular, concrete reality) thus establishing that actual knowledge is an intellectual judgement affirming a concrete existent.<sup>269</sup> This knowledge of a material *esse*, in Rahner's reading of St. Thomas, arises from the original unity of intellect and sensibility. The human person is the *a priori* bodily structure that emerges from this unity. In the *conversio*, the human person emerges as a bodily *esse* (a material essence) that returns to itself, becoming fully conscious of its knowledge as the knowledge of its own being in sensibility.

‘Therefore, the principle of the operation of intellectual knowing must formally (that is, as form) be in this man (as a material essence) ... But if the things mentioned are united, it must be said that a certain spiritual substance (remaining such, that is, free of matter) is the form of the human body [*forma humani corporis*].’ The things mentioned are united: the *a priori* structure of the spirit becomes the form of the sensibly given because sensibility is the receptive origin of the spirit ... The *a priori* structure of spirit, the knowledge of being as such, is therefore conscious not only as the structure of the sensibly given, but also as reaching beyond it, and hence the knower is present to himself as different from the other, he has returned to himself in knowing the sensibly given, and also knows the *a priori* form of the spirit as his own insofar as he elevates himself above the other.<sup>270</sup>

The principle of intellectual knowing must reside formally in the human being as a material essence. This means that spirit and body are not separate, but united such that the spiritual dimension serves as the form of the human body (*forma humani corporis*). In this unity, the *a priori* structure of spirit—its orientation towards being—is realized only through sensibility, which provides its receptive origin. Hence, spirit is conscious both of its dependence on the

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269. See Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 201–02.

270. Rahner, *Geist in Welt*, 103–104; *Spirit in the World*, 293–95.

sensibly given and of its capacity to surpass it. In knowing the concrete, the knower (intellect) also recognises itself as distinct from what is known, returning reflexively to itself as spirit that transcends the “otherness” of sensibility.

The following discussion will explore this relationship between knowledge and human embodiment through three dimensions: (a) prime matter as “being-present-to-itself,” (b) bodily form as the concrete self-objectification of prime matter in space and time, and (c) *esse* as the unity of prime matter and form.

#### **a. Prime Matter as “Being-Present-to-Itself” (*Beisichsein*)**

Turning to prime matter, Rahner follows St. Thomas in defining it as the wholly indeterminate “whither” (*Woraufhin*) of being, a reality inaccessible to direct knowing because it lacks the properties needed for concrete judgement.<sup>271</sup> This means that prime matter, strictly speaking, possesses neither quantitative properties (length, breadth, volume, etc.) nor qualitative characteristics (colour, shape, relation, etc.). It is entirely indeterminate and, therefore, cannot be grasped by the human intellect as a distinct “this” or any particular “that” in the real world.<sup>272</sup> In Rahner’s Thomistic reading, prime matter is a “clean slate in the order of intellect (*tabula rasa, materia prima in ordine intellectus*).”<sup>273</sup> This implies that the human intellect cannot possess direct, receptive knowledge of prime matter, since it cannot be associated with any material phantasm and, therefore, cannot be affirmed as an actuality in a concrete judgement.

For Rahner, prime matter, as formless and indeterminate, exists only in itself (*Ansich*) and becomes knowable only when united with a bodily form, since apart from such form it

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271. See Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 50.

272. See Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 60.

273. See Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 60.

remains beyond direct intellectual apprehension.<sup>274</sup> Prime matter becomes an actual being (*Realsein*) only through the assumption of a material or bodily form. It is the form that renders prime matter knowable and experientially accessible in the world. Thus, prime matter remains beyond the direct grasp of intellectual apprehension unless it is considered in unity with a concrete bodily form. As a reality that exists in itself (*Ansich*), prime matter is being-present-to-itself (*Beisichsein*).<sup>275</sup> In Rahner's Thomistic reading, *Beisichsein* refers to the "purest" material form of being—one that exists solely in itself, as formless matter, unaffected by the limiting categories of space and time.<sup>276</sup> Hence, prime matter is not an object of intellectual knowledge, since it lacks determinate materiality and cannot be known: "there is only one knowing ... a knowing of being-with-the-world [*ein wissendes Bei-der-Welt-Sein*]."<sup>277</sup>

Extending his analysis, Rahner argues that prime matter, without actuality, remains unknowable until it abandons itself to bodiliness, taking on a determinate form that renders it present to the intellect as a concrete being. For Rahner, "everything is knowable insofar as it is in act."<sup>278</sup> Prime matter is, strictly speaking, non-being, since it cannot be encountered concretely in the world. This means that prime matter is not in act—that is, it does not exist as an actual, determinate being—and therefore cannot be known. Because it lacks actuality, its being-present-to-itself is, paradoxically, always a not-being-present-to-itself in the

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274. See Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 74. In other words, prime matter is pure potency, which subsists only in union with form; apart from form it cannot exist as an actual being.

275. See Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 74.

276. Prime matter cannot be known in the proper Thomistic sense because it is non-existent in sensibility. According to Rahner, human knowledge is a unity between the intellect and sensibility. For this knowledge to occur, a concrete reality must be presupposed in sensibility as the proper object of knowledge. As Rahner explains: "Knowing is the being-present-to-self of being, and this being-present-to-self is the being of the existent (*Erkennen ist Beisichsein des Seins, und dieses Beisichsein ist das Sein des Seinden*)" (see Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 69).

277. Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 63.

278. Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 72.

concrete world. Since knowledge requires that a being be in act—possessing determinate existence—prime matter, which is never in act on its own, is not present to itself in the real world and is therefore unknowable to the intellect. It exists only as the passive “wherein” (*Worin*) in which another being becomes actual. In other words, while prime matter is “real” in itself (*Ansich*), it does not possess the act of being for itself and can subsist only through “another”:

Now if the being-able-to-be-present-to-self of being is an essentially indeterminate and variable quantity, and if according to experience (this is brought in here for the sake of simplicity in the development) there is a being that does not know in any way, hence is in no way present-to-itself, then the being of this existent itself cannot be present-to-itself, it cannot belong to it-self, it must be the being of “another” [*andern*’ *sein*]. This “other” must on the one hand be real, but on the other hand it cannot have being in itself and of itself. This empty, in-itself indeterminate “wherein” (*Worin*) of the being of an existent, in which being is in such a way that it is not for itself but for that, and so is not “present-to-itself,” is called Thomistically prime matter. It is now self-evident that knowing and knowability as presence-to-self and being-able-to-be-present-to-self are in a fixed relationship to the relation of being to matter.<sup>279</sup>

The metaphysical implication here is central to St. Thomas’ doctrine of knowledge: to “know” is to “be”—intellectual knowledge is always the knowledge of a material being in the world. Rahner presents prime matter as non-being because it cannot be known concretely as a material being. For prime matter to become knowable, it must be rendered determinate in the real world by assuming a material form—an “abandonment” (*Verlorenheit*) of itself to sensibility or concrete embodiment.<sup>280</sup> In this abandonment, prime matter’s being-present-to-itself (*Beisichsein*) transitions into a being-present-with-another (*beim-andern-Sein*).<sup>281</sup> The “other” here refers to sensibility, or the bodily dimension of being in the world. Only when prime matter abandons itself to bodiliness does it take on a concrete form and thus become

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279. Rahner, *Geist in Welt*, 66; *Spirit in the World*, 74.

280. See Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 81.

281. See Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 80–81.

knowable to the intellect as a determinate being.<sup>282</sup> In this sense, every bodily form is the concrete self-objectification of prime matter in space and time. Without this union, prime matter remains unknowable. It is only in and through bodily form that prime matter—otherwise unintelligible—takes shape and becomes an object of knowledge.

### **b. Form as the Self-actualization of Prime Matter**

Turning from prime matter to form, Rahner describes material form as the self-actualization of prime matter, the act that renders an otherwise indeterminate reality to be present and knowable in the world. Form, he writes, is “the productive origin of the determinations of an existent.”<sup>283</sup> It is the act that enables a reality to exist as something knowable. He distinguishes two types of forms in the thought of St. Thomas: (1) intellectual form, which refers to a universal *esse* in the intellect, and (2) material form, which is the bodily form of a concrete being in sensibility. Having already addressed intellectual universals, this analysis will now focus on the material form of a being as the self-actualization of prime matter.

As previously discussed, prime matter is the purest and most indeterminate—or generic—foundation of all reality.<sup>284</sup> It becomes a specific being in the world through its self-abandonment to a material or bodily form in sensibility.<sup>285</sup> In this way, bodily form is the physical objectification or self-actualization of prime matter in the real world. Because bodily

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282. See Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 80. Rahner does not explain how prime matter yields itself to sensibility, which is the concrete reality of matter that allows it to be objectively experienced as a real being in the world. He does not attempt to analyse the abstract categories of Aristotelian-Thomistic metaphysics in themselves, but rather seeks to demonstrate their relevance for a metaphysical epistemology. In an interview, Rahner described *Geist in Welt* as a “lopsided work of his youth” (See Rahner, *Faith in Wintry Season*, 22), indicating that he may have left several presuppositions unattended or unexplained. However, this does not compromise the integrity of the work as a foundation for his subsequent theological investigations.

283. Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 341.

284. See Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 74.

285. See Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 354.

form is the self-actualization of prime matter itself, Rahner emphasizes that form does not possess a separate act of being apart from matter. Rather, form is the “otherness” of prime matter as it appears in sensibility:

We must first of all look to the general relationship between matter and form. The material cause does not “produce” an effect “in” the form, that is, it does not bestow on it a determination which would be different from itself or the form. Such a notion would destroy the concept of material formal causality. The matter does not give the form a determination, but bestows itself upon it. Or, vice versa and better expressed: the form enters into the otherness [*Andersheit*] of its material cause, gives itself away to it. In this act of information, which the form itself is, the form does not produce something different from itself, but the form itself taken as itself is the actuality of matter, and as such an actuality producing itself as the actuality of matter, the form is determined by the matter, and not by an efficient process from the side of matter.<sup>286</sup>

Form and prime matter are not two separate realities in which one dominates or imposes itself upon the other. Rather, form becomes concrete only as the act of matter. It is not something externally added to matter, but is the objectivity of matter itself in space and time. Form gives—or abandons—itsself to prime matter in such a way that it becomes its concrete “otherness.” This mutual interdependence (*Beziehung*) means that form is the self-actualization of matter, and that its concrete determination in the world arises from its essential unity with prime matter, not from any efficient process or causality.<sup>287</sup> Form, then, is the material or bodily actualization of prime matter in space and time.<sup>288</sup>

Rahner conceives bodily form as the physical objectification of prime matter, its self-

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286. Rahner, *Geist in Welt*, 263; *Spirit in the World*, 354.

287. See also Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 329–30.

288. Rahner’s analysis of being in *Geist in Welt* could be criticized as overly speculative, insofar as he does not offer a detailed account of how prime matter gives itself over to bodily form in order to become a concrete being in the world. This omission raises important questions concerning the origin and relationship of prime matter and form—specifically, what is the nature of their unity prior to their concrete self-expression in matter? Although Rahner does not directly address this issue, his metaphysics of being in *Geist in Welt* centres on the human person, as an embodied subject who finds itself already existing in the world as an *a priori* question about being; “*der Mensch existiert als der Seinsfrage*” (see Rahner, *Geist in Welt*, 54–55; *Spirit in the World*, 57–58). The metaphysics of finite knowledge, as Rahner develops it, is therefore primarily concerned with the ontology of being-in-the-world (*in der Welt sein*), beginning not with abstract speculation about origins, but with the concrete human subject immersed in the world as a bodily spirit.

actualization in space and time. Although prime matter holds ontological priority over form in the order of existence and in its degree of participation in the act of being, both must co-exist as an original unity in the real world. Prime matter exists only through its bodily form, and bodily form exists as the self-actualization or act of matter. Rahner writes:

Form is in a certain way the cause of matter, insofar as it makes it to be in act; in a certain way matter is the cause of form, insofar as it sustains it.” It is to be noted here that the “making it to be in act,” the actualization of the potency of matter, is a fluid relationship remaining constantly in flux insofar as the form actualizes in each instance the concrete, definite potentiality of matter... The form of the agent produces its self-realization precisely into the matter of the patient only in the course of its seeking a “wherein” to sustain this self-realization (“it sustains the form itself”), because this agent, since it is not substantially united with the matter of the patient, reaches out to this only for the sake of its own self-realization ... Moreover, they are mutually “dependent” on each other. Because the self-realization of the agent takes place in the matter of the other, it is dependent on the matter of the patient; but this maker is dependent on the form of the patient “insofar as it makes matter to be in act.” So the self-realization of the agent is dependent on the “making matter to be in act” of the form of the patient, and this actualization of the potency of matter necessarily becomes a simultaneous actualization of the self-realization of the agent when the form of the patient gives actuality to its matter during the self-realization of the agent. And vice versa.<sup>289</sup>

Matter and form are mutually dependent and can be said to actualize one another. Being is always experienced concretely in the real world as the self-realization of matter through its form—and likewise, the actualization of form through matter. While prime matter may be hypothetically distinguished from its form, it cannot be separated from it in reality, and vice versa. A concrete material body (*Realsein*) emerges from the essential unity of prime matter and form. In this view, intellectual knowledge, properly understood as *conversio*, is the knowledge of a material form, a concretized *esse*, which always refers to an actual bodily being in the world.<sup>290</sup>

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289. Rahner, *Geist in Welt*, 69–70; *Spirit in the World*, 364–65.

290. See Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 174.

### c. *Esse* as the Unity of Prime Matter and Form

Rahner employs the Thomistic concept of *esse* as the concretising act that unites prime matter and form, grounding the actuality of every being and functioning as the most fundamental and radically universal principle of reality. He discusses *esse* not merely as a universal concept of being in the intellect, but more specifically as the concretising synthesis of matter and form affirmed in a concrete judgement. In other words, *esse*, as a concretising act, confers the actuality of being upon a particular reality in a judgement. As that which gives existence to all that is, *esse* is predicated equally and simultaneously of every existing being—regardless of genus or species. It confers the act of being to a human just as it does to a dog or an elephant. Every concrete existent participates in the same act of *esse*, despite differing in their essential forms (*quidditas*) or natures. Thus, *esse* is the innermost reality in anything that exists—it is the foundational ground of all reality, and therefore universal and repeatable in the most supreme and radical sense:

*Esse* has been shown to be universal itself in the judgment, to be the ground of the reality of many (all) possible quiddities. The way we speak of *esse* as the full ground of all the determinations of an existent does not go essentially beyond Thomas. For he speaks of *esse* himself as what is “innermost” in every existent. The concrete essence of something which exists in itself, expressed in the concretizing synthesis as such, is thus the expression of the extent to which, in a definite existent, *esse*, the ground of reality for an existent, can let such an existent really exist ... The universality of *esse* also appears as repeatability [*Wiederholbarkeit*], insofar as many of the same can really be, insofar as many concrete instances of the same quiddity are apprehended as existing.<sup>291</sup>

*Esse*—the act of being—is a universal, though not in the same way that essential forms (such as “triangleness” or “humanity”) are universal. Essential forms are universal because they can be predicated of many individual beings that belong to the same species: for example, many human beings share the same form of “humanity,” just as many triangles share the same form of “triangleness.” In contrast, *esse* is universal in a deeper and more fundamental

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291. Rahner, *Geist in Welt*, 138; *Spirit in the World*, 174.

sense: it is the inner ground of reality that enables many distinct beings to exist simultaneously. When we recognise a being as truly existing, we are affirming that *esse*—the act of being—has actualized that being’s essence, allowing it to become a concrete existent. *Esse*, then, is not simply repeatable like an essential form; it is what gives actuality itself to all essential forms, making it the most foundational and radically universal principle. In this way, *esse* (existence) is universal not as a concept that applies to many things, but as the very act by which many different beings come to be.

Rahner maintains that every *esse*, even when merely intentional, refers to a concrete material existent, since in the Thomistic sense intentional *esse* remains a real, physical mode of being. According to him, even when St. Thomas speaks of “intentional *esse*”—the mode of being proper to intelligible species as opposed to a physical being or a “natural” *esse*—“intentional” is not to be understood in the modern sense of “intentionality” as purely ideal being.<sup>292</sup> For Thomas, as Rahner interprets him, intentional *esse* denotes the presence of a form in a knowing subject without its own matter, yet without implying that this presence is unreal or merely mental. In fact, as Rahner notes, Thomas can speak of intentional *esse* where no act of knowledge is involved at all; for example, light and colour as they exist “intentionally” in the air, or the power of a principal agent as it is “intentionally” present in an instrument.<sup>293</sup> In such cases, the intentional *esse* is still a real, physical mode of being.

Rahner, in line with St. Thomas, affirms that all knowledge of *esse* must be grounded in material phantasms, rejecting any conception of being as a purely abstract or disembodied truth. Drawing on St. Thomas, Rahner insists that even the most universal knowledge of *esse* must be united with material phantasms, so that knowing remains grounded in the concrete realities of the world. For Thomas, Rahner explains, all knowledge of *esse* in the human intellect must be

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292. See Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 89.

293. See Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 89.

“converted” to or united with a material phantasm in the real world.<sup>294</sup> *Esse*, in this Thomistic sense, is strictly speaking, always *esse* of a concretion—it cannot be understood merely as an abstract, universal concept in the intellect, detached from concrete being in the world. Rahner articulates this point as follows:

In referring to knowledge, Thomas always had in mind really human knowledge, that with which man finds himself in the real world [*Erkenntnis als das wirklich menschliche vor Augen, mit der Mensch sich bei der wirklichen Welt findet*]. The thought that knowledge could be defined as the apprehension of validities, of a pure order of essences, is for him, therefore, fundamentally untenable. Thus, from the outset, even the knowledge of quiddities and their necessary relations to one another is for him knowledge of the relationships of existing things ... So for Thomas, knowledge appears from the outset as attaining to the things of the real world, and he sees no reason to extend the in-itself [*Ansichsein*] of the real world of objects by an ideal in-itself [*Ansich*] which is in principle independent of this world.<sup>295</sup>

Inferring from St. Thomas, Rahner holds that human knowledge is always rooted in the real, material world. The knowledge of being is not a separate or detached universal concept in the intellect; rather, intellectual knowledge requires a *conversio ad phantasma*—a return to the concrete material experience from which the intellect originates as a unity. Rahner, following St. Thomas, explicitly rejects the notion of a purely metaphysical realm of truth that exists independently of the real bodily world.

Rahner affirms that in every act of knowing, sensibility and intellect form an inseparable unity within the embodied human person, so that whatever is given in the senses is already present to the intellect. For Rahner, knowledge is always given as a concretising synthesis of intellect and sensibility. This synthesis is fully actualized concretely in the human person as the knowing subject:

It is not the powers that know, but man: “It is said more properly that man knows through the soul”; “for, properly speaking, it is not the senses or intellect which know, but man through them both.” Hence, when there is question of abstraction, the unity of consciousness is already given from the outset for

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294. See Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 164.

295. Rahner, *Geist in Welt*, 131; *Spirit in the World*, 164–65.

Thomas. What is given in sensibility, to the extent that it is given there, is by that very fact also given for the intellect, since properly speaking nothing at all is given for the faculties, but for the knower through them.<sup>296</sup>

In every act of knowing, sensibility and intellect are not two successive moments but the inseparable unity of a single conscious event. Whatever is given in sensibility is, by that very fact, already illumined by the light of the intellect, because it is the one “spirit-in world”—the concretely embodied human person, who knows through both. This metaphysical unity discloses the original synthesis of the “bodily” (sensibility) and “spiritual” (intellectual) dimensions in which all human knowing is grounded.<sup>297</sup>

## 4.2 Being as Bodiliness (*Leiblichkeit*)

This section analyses Rahner’s ontology of being in *Geist in Welt*, showing *Leiblichkeit*—the embodied dimension of human existence—as the fundamental condition for all knowledge and experience of being. Knowledge, understood as the unity of intellect and sensibility, is not an abstract intellectual construct; it is an ontologically embodied union that finds its concrete realization in the human person as a bodily spirit—an inseparable unity of matter (“body”) and spirit (“soul”) existing concretely in the world. The discussion will unfold in three parts: (1) an analysis of human knowledge as knowledge grounded in and through sensibility, (2) an exploration of sensibility as the concrete dimension of human existence in the world, and (3) an interpretation of concrete human experience as bodiliness (*Leiblichkeit*).

### 4.2.1. Knowledge in and through Sensibility

Rahner maintains that all intellectual knowledge is knowledge in and through

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296. Rahner, *Geist in Welt*, 164; *Spirit in the World*, 212.

297. Basically, there are no separate “bodily” and “spiritual” dimensions of knowing in Rahner’s metaphysics of knowledge, as if a “body” and a “spirit” first existed independently and were then subsequently fused into an inseparable unity. For Rahner, there is only one act of human knowing, and this knowing belongs to the human person as a concretely embodied spirit-in-world who is always already both bodily and spiritual.

sensibility, arising from the concrete encounter with a real being (*Realsein*) rather than from a purely abstract concept of being.<sup>298</sup> Intellectual knowledge, as already discussed, is always knowledge of a concretized *esse*—a universal that emerges in the intellect through sensibility. This concretized *esse* is the intellectual representation of the human encounter with concrete being in the world. For Rahner, knowledge is more experiential than purely conceptual. This affirms his central Thomistic conviction that all human knowing is an intellectual knowledge of a concrete encounter with material being in the real world—in a way that is immaterial, universal, and necessary.<sup>299</sup> Within this Thomistic view, human knowledge is fundamentally grounded in the experience of a concrete existent (*Wirklichsein*), rather than confined to a purely conceptual or abstract knowledge of being in the intellect. Thus, for Rahner, to know a being is to encounter the actual being-in-itself (*Ansichsein*) concretely in the world. Intellectual knowledge is always knowledge in and through sensibility.<sup>300</sup>

Rahner uses the Thomistic *conversio ad phantasma* to show that all intellectual knowledge originates in the embodied human person, arising from the intellect's turn towards sensibility as its essential unity with a passible body. As discussed earlier, the *conversio ad phantasma* refers to the “turn” of the intellect towards the phantasms of the imaginative sense (sensibility) arising from the encounter with a real bodily being in the world. This *conversio* is realized as an act of judgement, by which the intellect becomes conscious of itself and

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298. Cf. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Moment of Christian Witness*, trans. Richard Beckley (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), 70–81. Among Balthasar's (1905–1988) many criticisms of Rahner, the fiercest appear in this work (originally published in German as *Cordula, oder der Ernstfall*, 1966). Here Balthasar warns against the dangers of a “progressive” Christianity which, in his view, threatens Catholic faith and the meaning of martyrdom. He locates such dangers in what he considers a Rahnerian reading of the Kantian transcendental project. Balthasar's first concern is epistemological. If, as Rahner argues, knowledge is grounded primarily in sensibility, how can it provide access to God or to realities beyond what the senses can grasp? For a counter-reaction, see Edean, Philip. “On Balthasar, Rahner, and *The Commissar*.” *New Blackfriars* 79, no. 923 (January 1998): 33–38. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43250081>

299. For further discussion, see Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 18–23, 164–65.

300. See Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 146. Here, sensibility refers to the concrete dimension of human experience in the world, where being is encountered as a material reality in the unity of matter and form. Material bodies emerge in space and time as the self-actualization of this unity.

recognises that its knowledge, properly speaking, comprises a unity with a passible body in sensibility. In this view, knowledge properly belongs not to the intellect alone, but to the concrete human person, who exists in the world as an inseparable “union of the human intellect with the body.”<sup>301</sup> The human person, as an embodied historical subject, is the origin and foundation of all knowledge and experience of being:

Just as the essence of the intellect can be understood only with that of the conversion to the phantasm in a single act of comprehension, so too in the same way and for the same reason the fact and the meaning of the essential unity of intellect and passible body can be defined only together with the conversion to the phantasm and in light of it. In the radical unity of intellect and imagination, the essential unity of passible body and intellect comes to light for the first time... But this characterization of the human intellect is already an option made in advance about what is to be the vantage point from which we are to come to a definition of its essence as well as to the metaphysics of that essence and its contents: the vantage point is to be the real, concrete man, his being situated in this world of space and time.<sup>302</sup>

Human knowledge arises from the turning of the intellect towards sensibility (*conversio ad phantasma*) which enables the intellect to become conscious of its unity with a passible body, culminating in the concrete human person as an embodied subject in the world. Intellectual knowledge is comprehensible only from this vantage point of embodied human existence. All knowledge must begin with the human person as a bodily subject situated in the world—there is no other metaphysical starting point: “as a matter of fact man sees no possibility of understanding himself from any other standpoint except that at which he has always found himself whenever he turned to himself: the world.”<sup>303</sup>

#### **4.2.2. The Human Person as the Unity of Matter and Form**

Rahner clarifies, following Thomas, that the human person is not two separable

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301. Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 39.

302. Rahner, *Geist in Welt*, 35–36; *Spirit in the World*, 32–33.

303. Rahner, *Geist in Welt*, 35–36; *Spirit in the World*, 32–33.

substances (“body” and “soul”), but one substance: a unity of prime matter informed by soul, with the human body as the visible self-objectification of this unity.<sup>304</sup> According to Rahner, the human person exists as a concrete unity of matter and form. The bodily dimension of human existence is the self-actualization or objectification of this unity. Following St. Thomas, Rahner maintains that the human person is not properly defined as a union of “body and soul,” but rather as a unity of “prime matter (*materia prima*) and soul.”<sup>305</sup> The soul is the substantial form that actualizes prime matter, and together this actuality expresses itself concretely in the world as a material body.<sup>306</sup> In other words, the human body is the visible self-objectification of the actuality of prime matter and soul. Rahner writes:

The “soul” is also the only actuality of the body itself as a material substance, it is not a spiritual essence in a chemical substance which has its own determinations from itself. The soul is visible because and insofar as the visible actuality of the body is its own actuality; it is invisible only insofar as the substantial ground of every visible, even merely material thing is invisible, and above all, insofar as in the production of this visible actuality it keeps its own essence free in itself. Thomistically, man does not consist of “body” and “soul” [*nicht aus ‘Leib’ und ‘Seele’*], but of soul and prime matter [*sondern aus anima und materia prima*], which distinction is essentially “meta”-physical.<sup>307</sup>

The human person, as a concrete embodied subject, is the self-actualization of the unity of prime matter and soul in space and time. Without the body, the soul remains metaphysically hidden as a pure act; without the soul, the body remains formless as unactualized primary matter.

Continuing his account of matter and form, Rahner interprets the body as the soul’s

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304. See also Daniel Munteanu, “Karl Rahners Theologie der Leiblichkeit: Die Apotheose der Materie,” *Teologia* 1 (2010): 57.

305. Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 324.

306. As Rahner explains: “the soul is not merely the only substantial actuality of man; it also produces by itself all accidental determinations insofar as it lets them emanate as different from itself, and receives them in itself as its own. It receives no actuality from a body which would have actuality of itself, but produces all the actuality of the body from itself, so that the actuality of the body is its own” (Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 327).

307. Rahner, *Geist in Welt*, 242; *Spirit in the World*, 324.

visible manifestation in the world, making human knowing possible only through their substantial unity. Drawing on Thomistic thought, he argues that St. Thomas ultimately moves beyond the notion of the soul as an independent, immaterial principle capable of existing apart from the body:

Although Thomas usually approaches the substantial unity of body and soul, the spiritual soul as the form of matter, from the fact that the one man meets us as the subject of spiritual and sensible activity ... Thomas already understands sensibility to be required by the specifically human mode of the spiritual. “But because our human soul’s knowing ... needs powers which operate through certain corporeal organs, namely, the imagination and the senses, this very fact means that it is naturally united with the body for man to be complete.”<sup>308</sup>

The soul expresses itself concretely in the world as a body. The body is not merely a biological vessel inhabited by the soul, but the visible manifestation of the whole human person as a bodily spirit—a substantial unity of prime matter and soul. The “human body” (*Leib*), then, is not just a fleshy mass of chemical atoms but a “spirited body.”<sup>309</sup> The spiritual soul expresses itself in the world as a material body. Human knowledge is thus complete only in the substantial unity of soul and body: “actual knowledge of the essence of one’s own soul is possible only with the help of the object originating in sensibility.”<sup>310</sup>

Rahner presents the human person as a bodily spirit whose soul becomes knowable only through its self-objectification as a body, the concrete locus of all knowledge and experience of being. For Rahner, the human person is not a dual composition of body and soul but a substantial unity of soul and prime matter whose existence is fully realized only in concrete, embodied existence (*Leiblichkeit*). In this view, the body is not merely a biological

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308. Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 249–50.

309. Cf. Kelly M. Kapic, *Embodied Hope: A Theological Meditation on Pain and Suffering* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2017), 44–49. For Kapic, the human person is a material or bodily being, but the body is more than mere physical flesh. It constitutes an original unity of matter and spirit, and it is through this embodied unity that all human activities—including rational and spiritual acts—are carried out. Consequently, the body must be understood not as a passive vessel for the soul, but as a “spirited body.”

310. See Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 218.

vessel or physical container inhabited by a soul, but the concrete self-objectification of the soul (its visible form) in space and time. Human subjectivity is therefore always concretely embodied, and the soul is knowable only insofar as it actualizes itself in the world as a material body. In bodily form, the human person thus stands as the ontological site in which all knowledge and experience of being take place.

### 4.2.3. Experience as Embodied Existence

Rahner understands human experience in the world as ultimately embodied (*Verleiblichung*) whereby the human person exists as a historical subject whose bodily reality is the medium of all material and spiritual encounter. In *Geist in Welt*, Rahner ultimately understands the concrete dimension of human experience in the world (sensibility) as “bodiliness” (*Leiblichkeit*). The concept of body arises from the recognition that every knowledge of being in the world is, first and foremost, the experience of the human person as an embodied, historical subject.<sup>311</sup> In this view, the human body (*Leib*) is not simply something a person possesses, but what a person fundamentally is.<sup>312</sup> Bodiliness signifies that the human person is an open system, fundamentally receptive to the world through sensibility, and inexhaustibly open to the possibility of transcendental experience through intellectual operations.<sup>313</sup> It is as body that the human person encounters the external world,

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311. The concept of *Leiblichkeit* reflects a critical metaphysical reflection on human bodiliness as a fundamental category for every possible human experience and encounter with being in the world. After all, it is only through our embodied existence that we are able to know and respond to the world, to other humans, and ultimately to God. Cf. James B. Nelson, *Body Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992), 42–43. For Nelson, the body possesses its own epistemological integrity, with a unique capacity for knowing that often differs from rational cognition, and thus the task of body theology is to engage in critical theological reflection on bodily experience as a fundamental realm of encounter with God, since it is only through our embodied existence that we come to know and respond to the world.

312. In *Geist in Welt*, Rahner carefully distinguishes between terms used for the human body, such as *Leib*, *Leiblichkeit*, and those used for inanimate bodies, such as *Körper*. For example, he refers to the human body as *Leib* (see Rahner, *Geist in Welt*, 188–189), emphasising the intrinsic unity of matter and spirit. By contrast, he uses *Körper* (see Rahner, *Geist in Welt*, 250–51) when discussing inanimate or physical bodies, underscoring their purely material nature.

313. Cf. Karl-Heinz Weger, *Karl Rahner: An Introduction to His Theology* (New York: Seabury Press, 1980), 44. Weger (1932–1998) notes that Rahner is firmly convinced that any genuine understanding of what is

understands their place within it, and forms relationships with self, others, the natural world, and the divine.<sup>314</sup> In this sense, human bodiliness is also a spiritual medium: through bodiliness, the divine engages the human—as incarnate revelation—and the human responds to this revelation. Drawing from St. Thomas, Rahner asserts that the human person, in their historical embeddedness on earth, is the concrete site of divine revelation:

Man concerns Thomas the theologian at the point at which God manifests Himself in such a way that He is able to be heard in the word of His revelation: “from the viewpoint of his soul.” In order to be able to hear whether God speaks, we must know that He is; lest His word come to one who already knows, He must be hidden from us; in order to speak to man, His word must encounter us where we already and always are, in an earthly place, at an earthly hour [*an irdischem Ort, in irdischer Stunde*]. Insofar as man enters into the world by turning to the phantasm, the revelation of being as such and in it the knowledge of God’s existence has already been achieved.<sup>315</sup>

Bodiliness refers not only to subjective, individually lived experience, but also to how humans interact with one another, with their social and cultural worlds, with nature, and with the divine. From this perspective, bodiliness is not a narrow subjectivity, but the very basis of interpersonal relationships—a medium through which the human person encounters the wider world as an extension of their bodily subjectivity.<sup>316</sup> This expanded understanding of bodiliness demonstrates its intrinsic link with the natural world, making human bodiliness, in

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meant by “God” can only begin when we fully acknowledge that our concrete existence in the world is infinitely open and cannot be confined within any single parameter.

314 Cf. Thomas Sheehan, “Rahner’s Transcendental Project,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Rahner*, edited by Declan Marmion and Mary E. Hines (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 40. Commenting on transcendental knowledge in Rahner, he writes: “What we make sense of is always ourselves—along with all that we are and do. So yes, each of us is a self-relatedness. But even as self-related, none of us is ever a monad. We are all related to someone and something: everyone has a mother and a body. In fact, everything we can encounter is a body and therefore is actually or potentially related to every other body, because everything we can encounter (including ourselves) is othered. The uniqueness of our form of otheredness consists in being self-related and thus able to understand all the others. So when we say that the object of sense making is always ourselves, we mean by “ourselves” not just our personal and social selves but also our material selves. Materiality and sociality are inseparable from human selfhood.

315. Rahner, *Geist in Welt*, 300; *Spirit in the World*, 408.

316. In this view, bodiliness is not merely a component of human subjectivity but a living and expansive reality that extends beyond material existence to embrace the metaphysical. For a similar view, see Isherwood and Stuart, *Introducing Body Theology*, 114–31.

Rahner's words, "an inner-worldly, efficient causality among material things."<sup>317</sup>

From the foregoing discussion, the following understanding of *Leiblichkeit* (bodiliness), as developed in *Geist in Welt*, may be articulated:

**a. *Leiblichkeit* as the Principle of Human Subjectivity**

*Leiblichkeit* is the foundational principle of human subjectivity, grounding the unity of body and soul, matter and spirit, history and transcendence in a concrete, embodied subject. Drawing on St. Thomas' concept of the soul as the form of matter, Rahner emphasizes that the human person is not a dualistic composite of body and soul, but a spiritual being whose soul expresses and realizes itself concretely in the world as a body. The body, therefore, is not merely something a person *has*, but rather what the person *is*: a lived unity of spirit and matter, the concrete and original self-expression of the soul in the world. *Leiblichkeit*—as distinct from *Körperlichkeit*—captures the full spiritual depth of human subjectivity in a way that exceeds conventional understandings of the body as mere physical skin or biological mass.<sup>318</sup> Thus, *Leiblichkeit* is not simply an external or physiological condition, but the very ground of human subjectivity. The body is the visible, tangible self-expression of the human spirit in history. This lived bodiliness—unlike mere *Körperlichkeit*—includes the interior, spiritual dimensions of human existence.<sup>319</sup> It means that I belong to the world, and the world belongs to me, from the beginning—through every

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317. See Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, 331–32.

318. Rahner articulates this view with striking clarity: "Through bodiliness the whole world belongs to me from the start, in everything that happens. Of course we must not get the impression in this connection that our body stops where our skin stops, as if we were a sack containing a number of different things, which clearly ceases to be what it is where its 'skin', the sacking, stops." Rahner, "The Body in the Order of Salvation," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 17, *Jesus, Man and the Church*, trans. Margaret Kohl, (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1981), 89.

319. Cf. Nancey Murphy, *Bodies and Souls, or Spirited Bodies?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 111–23. Murphy holds that human bodiliness must, be differentiated from physicality. Physicalist approaches to being assert that the human body—and indeed everything that exists—is fundamentally physical in nature. Such approaches maintain that all concrete phenomena within space and time can be fully explained in terms of physical processes and properties. Physicalist perspectives typically align with empirical scientific methodologies, seeking to interpret all aspects of reality through the laws of physics, chemistry, and biology.

bodily act and sensation. The body is not defined by its physical boundaries and limitations; rather, *Leiblichkeit* constitutes the human person's entire mode of being-in-the-world.

### **b. *Leiblichkeit* as the Principle of Relationality**

*Leiblichkeit* is also the principle of relationality—through which the human person encounters the self, other human beings, the natural world, and enters into spiritual relationship with the divine. The body serves as the medium by which human beings are fundamentally open and receptive to what exists both within and beyond themselves. It is through *Leiblichkeit*—the bodily dimension of human existence in the world—that human beings locate themselves in history and society. Bodiliness enables the formation of relationships with the self, with others, with the natural world, and with God—through love, freedom, dialogue, solidarity, science, and religion. Thus, *Leiblichkeit* extends beyond personal subjectivity. It encompasses interpersonal relationship, connection with the material world, and the spiritual experience of the divine as grace and mystery. In this way, the material body becomes a sacred locus for the encounter between the human and the divine—a place where revelation is received and reciprocated.<sup>320</sup> The body is not only the site of self-presence, but also the site of shared presence with others in the world.

### **c. *Leiblichkeit* as the Principle of Self-Transcendence**

Finally, *Leiblichkeit* functions as the principle of self-transcendence: it is through the body that human beings discover themselves as spiritual subjects oriented towards divine life. In Rahner's thought, the human "spirit" (intellect) becomes conscious only by entering into or abandoning itself to sensibility, that is, to the material bodiliness of the world. Transcendental experience—the capacity of the intellect to reach beyond knowledge of itself and the material world towards Absolute Being—can be realized only through the intellect's

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320. See also Munteanu, "Karl Rahners Theologie der Leiblichkeit," 61.

*a priori* unity with a material body. It is through their bodily presence in space and time that human beings transcend themselves and encounter God in a free and loving revelation. In this view, *Leiblichkeit* is the condition for the possibility of spiritual and mystical experience: it is the locus where God's love, as grace, becomes concretely visible and present in the world.

These dimensions of *Leiblichkeit*—as the principle of human subjectivity, relationality, and self-transcendence—together characterise the concrete reality of human existence in the world. While these aspects can be distinguished conceptually, they are inseparable in lived experience: the human person is always a subject who exists bodily, relates through that bodiliness, and transcends themselves towards God in and through the same embodied relationships.<sup>321</sup>

In *Geist in Welt*, Rahner places decisive emphasis on *Leiblichkeit* as the foundational structure of being-in-the-world. Drawing from St. Thomas, he develops a metaphysical framework in which the concrete dimension of human existence—*Leiblichkeit*—is not merely a biological attribute but the very ground of all human knowing, historical presence in the world, and the possibility of mystical experience of the divine. The human person, in *Leiblichkeit*, is always an open system oriented towards being in general—precisely as a “spirit-in-world” (*Geist in Welt*), whose capacity for self-transcendence is realized within the concrete and historical conditions of bodily existence. It is in and as bodiliness that the human person becomes fully and truly *Geist in Welt*—a spirit manifest only with and in the world of embodied human life. Rahner states:

Only this much is certain: man is in the presence of being in its totality insofar as he finds himself in the world. The “present state of life, in which he is united with a passible body” (*Der ‘status praesentis vitae, quo passibili corpori conjungitur’*) is the only “state” that Thomas knows anything about in which man who asks about being exists. His man dwells on earth, and it is not given to him to exchange this dwelling place for a heavenly one at his own discretion. Even Thomas's theology is not a flight from the earth, but the

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321. See also Stephen M. Fields, S.J., *Being as Symbol: On the Origins and Development of Karl Rahner's Metaphysics* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2000), 78–80.

hearing of the word of God within the narrow confines of this world and within the flitting brevity of an earthly hour ... And even if man wanted to flee this world as the place of all his questioning—by mysticism or suicide or any other way—and could thus reach some other place for an understanding of being, he would still have begun on this earth.<sup>322</sup>

The human person—understood through the lens of *Leiblichkeit*—is a bodily spirit in the world, whose capacity for self-transcendence and openness to what lies beyond the world is realized only within the concrete conditions of human historicity and bodily existence. For Rahner, following Thomas, there is no alternative state of human existence in the world apart from this concrete bodily life. The human being dwells on earth and can pose the question of being only from within this finite horizon of embodied existence.

In sum, Rahner's *Geist in Welt* advances a decisive claim: all human knowing is an embodied event, grounded in the metaphysical unity of intellect and sensibility. Against dualistic or purely intellectualist accounts, he demonstrates that human consciousness is not an abstract mental possession but the existential act of judgement, in which the knower affirms the concrete reality of what is known. This act unfolds through a dynamic intellectual process of abstraction—qualitative, quantitative, and transcendental—yet remains inseparably bound to the material world (sensibility) through the *conversio ad phantasma*. Even the most universal concepts of being are only understood through the bodily dimension of human existence (*Leiblichkeit*).

This epistemological framework reveals the human person not as a composite of two separable substances but as a unity of prime matter and soul: a bodily spirit (*Leib*), whose knowing and being cannot be disentangled from embodied historicity. Bodiliness (*Leiblichkeit*) thus emerges as the foundational principle of subjectivity, the medium of relationality with others and the world, and the locus of transcendental experience towards

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322. Rahner, *Geist in Welt*, 57–58; *Spirit in the World*, 62–63.

God. To be human is not to possess a body but to be a body—an embodied spirit whose openness to being is realized only in and through material existence.

By grounding knowledge in bodiliness, Rahner reinterprets St. Thomas' metaphysics of being from a modern existential horizon. The act of knowing is always a concrete, historical participation in being, in which the human person discovers themselves as *Geist in Welt*: a spirit whose capacity for self-transcendence is realized only within the finite horizon of embodied life. This conviction—that there is no knowing apart from bodiliness—will form the foundation of Rahner's subsequent reflections in *Hörer des Wortes*, where the same metaphysical structure of human openness is shown to be the necessary condition for hearing and receiving God's self-revelation in history.

## Chapter 5

### *Hörer des Wortes: Philosophical Foundations of Divine Revelation*

Rahner's *Hörer des Wortes* (1941) stands as a pivotal text in his early development as a theologian, providing the philosophical groundwork for his theology of revelation and grace.<sup>323</sup> Written in dialogue with the epistemological tradition of St. Thomas and shaped by the metaphysical presuppositions of *Geist in Welt* (1939), the work seeks to clarify the conditions under which divine revelation can be received as a real, historical event. At its heart lies a fundamental conviction: the human person, as a concrete, finite, and historical spirit, is ontologically structured to receiving a possible divine revelation in the world. While this ontological human structure does not itself guarantee revelation, it constitutes the embodied horizon within which God may freely disclose Godself concretely in history as a human person.

The chapter proceeds in two sections. The first explores Rahner's philosophical presuppositions for theology, distinguishing between philosophy of religion as a preparatory discipline for theology, and theology proper as the science of divine revelation. Philosophy of religion investigates the transcendental structure of human nature—the innate dynamism of the human spirit (*Vorgriff*) toward the horizon of being—yet theology alone can articulate the specific content and goal of this transcendental structure, namely divine revelation.

Section two turns to the tension between humanity's transcendental openness and the radical freedom of divine revelation. While the *Vorgriff* signifies that human beings always

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323. See Karl Rahner, *Hörer des Wortes: Zur Grundlegung einer Religionsphilosophie* (Munich: Verlag Kösel-Pustet, 1941); *Hearer of the Word: Laying the Foundation for a Philosophy of Religion*, trans. Joseph Donceel, ed. Andrew Tallon (New York: Continuum, 1994). See also Karl Rahner, *Hörer des Wortes*, in *Sämtliche Werke*, Bd. 4, *Schriften zur Religionsphilosophie und zur Grundlegung der Theologie*, ed. Albert Raffelt (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1997), 1–278.

already stand before the Absolute as the horizon of their transcendental structure, this structure does not inevitably make the human person capable of receiving a possible divine revelation in history. On the contrary, Rahner insists that revelation must always be understood as a free act of God's self-giving love, an unpredictable Word that enters history and addresses the human being as one who is ontologically structured to "hear" the Word of revelation within the historical conditions of human embodiment.

The chapter concludes by examining bodiliness (*Leiblichkeit*) as the indispensable ground of the giving and receiving of divine revelation. Because the human spirit is always embodied and historical, revelation can never be detached from the concrete conditions of human existence. It is precisely through this finite, bodily historicity that God's absolute self-communication is disclosed. This horizon of transcendental human openness finds its fulfilment only in the Incarnation, where the Word becomes flesh and divine revelation attains its definitive, embodied form.

### 5.1. The Groundwork of a Philosophical Theology

This section examines the philosophical foundations of Rahner's metaphysical anthropology in *Hörer des Wortes*, establishing how the human person, as a bodily spirit, is inherently capable of receiving divine revelation in history. To develop this view, the section will examine four relevant themes: (1) the philosophy of religion as a pre-theological discipline; (2) "luminosity" as the human orientation toward the question of being; (3) "intensity" as constitutive of the *Vorgriff*—the pre-apprehension of being; and (4) the tension between luminosity and the possibility of revelation. Through these discussions, Rahner situates theology within a broader metaphysical anthropology, affirming that human embodiment and historicity are essential to understanding divine revelation as a concrete historical event.

### 5.1.1. Philosophy of Religion as Pre-Theological Horizon

In *Hörer des Wortes*, Rahner explores the relationship between theology and the philosophy of religion, describing it as marked by both “kinship and enmity” (*Verwandtschaft und Feindschaft*).<sup>324</sup> While both disciplines are united in their concern with the divine, they remain methodologically distinct. The philosophy of religion investigates the possibility of divine revelation (*die Selbstmitteilung Gottes*) through natural reason; theology, by contrast, presupposes such revelation and interprets it as it has concretely occurred within the history of salvation.<sup>325</sup> Yet despite their divergence in approach, both share a common metaphysical ground. For Rahner, all human inquiry—including both philosophical and theological reflection—is rooted in metaphysics, which furnishes the fundamental conditions for the knowledge and experience of being.<sup>326</sup> As the first science (*epistème proté*), metaphysics undergirds the human capacity to reflect on Absolute Being, and thus forms the foundational horizon from which both philosophy of religion and theology can meaningfully engage the question of the relationship between the divine and the human.<sup>327</sup>

Rahner defines the philosophy of religion as a metaphysical inquiry into the human person’s *a priori* or natural orientation towards Absolute Being, grounded in the capacity to question being and relate to its absolute ground.<sup>328</sup> This inquiry, he contends, is not a speculative construction of a “natural religion,” but a critical reflection on what it means to be human—that is, to be a finite, bodily, and free subject situated in the world yet oriented toward the infinite ground of being beyond the world.<sup>329</sup> For Rahner, such reflection is

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324. See Rahner, *Hörer des Wortes*, 9; *Hearer of the Word*, 1.

325. See Rahner, *Hearer of the Word*, 6–7.

326. See Rahner, *Hearer of the Word*, 8–13.

327. See Rahner, *Hearer of the Word*, 2–4.

328. See Rahner, *Hearer of the Word*, 4.

329. See Rahner, *Hearer of the Word*, 11.

inseparable from metaphysics, insofar as it asks how the human subject, as a being-in-the-world, is capable of raising the question of being itself and of relating to its absolute ground.<sup>330</sup> In this sense, the philosophy of religion affirms the fundamental metaphysical claim that transcendental experience is always mediated through the concrete and embodied structures of human existence in the world.<sup>331</sup>

Rahner distinguishes theology from the philosophy of religion by defining it as the receptive, historical listening to God's self-revelation, rather than a purely philosophical reflection on transcendental human openness.<sup>332</sup> He makes it clear that the transcendental human openness to God, as articulated in the philosophy of religion, is not sufficient for genuine theology: whereas the philosophy of religion begins with human questioning, theology begins with God's answer, the historical event of God's revelatory Word (*Offenbarungswort Gottes*).<sup>333</sup> This divine speech is not merely a conceptual proposition but a concrete Word addressed to the human person as "a hearer" (*Hörer*) capable of receiving and responding to revelation. Rahner writes:

Originally theology is not a human work, but a listening to the freely proffered self-revelation of God through God's own Word. In its first and original meaning, theology is not a system of valid statements, set up by human thought, but the totality of the divine discourse addressed by God to us in

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330. See Rahner, *Hearer of the Word*, 16.

331. In this regard, Rahner makes an important contrast between Protestant philosophy of religion and traditional fundamental theology on the one hand, and metaphysical anthropology on the other. Protestant philosophy of religion, like fundamental theology in its classical form, demonstrates the existence of God and the possibility of revelation, but often fails to explore the intrinsic connection between revelation and human nature as an openness to being (*Offenheit des Seins*) in general. Rahner critiques this method for treating revelation as an "addition" to human knowledge rather than as something to which human nature is inherently oriented. This gap leaves fundamental theology unable to fully articulate why humans, in their historicity and embodiment, are naturally open to truths that transcend natural reason. In contrast, Rahner situates the philosophy of religion as part of metaphysical anthropology, which focuses on the human capacity for revelation. His approach avoids speculating on divine action and instead establishes the philosophy of religion as the epistemological foundation for theology. Rahner argues that humans are intrinsically oriented toward "hearing" and responding to divine revelation, which speaks to the metaphysical structure of their existence as being-in-the-world (*In-der-Welt-Sein*). This perspective reveals the dual orientation of human nature: openness to revelation and the natural capacity to listen to God's Word—a view that underscores the anthropological and existential dimensions of theology. For a fuller discussion, see Rahner, *Hearer of the Word*, 14–22.

332. See also Rahner, *Foundations*, 24–25.

333. See Rahner, *Hörer des Wortes*, 16–17; *Hearer of the Word*, 5.

human language. We can and must then subject it to our own inquiring and systematizing thought and integrate it within the totality of all human knowledge, thus setting up the science of theology.<sup>334</sup>

Theology in its original sense is not a purely intellectual construction, as in the philosophy of religion, but a receptive and historical listening to God's Word. It presupposes that God has already spoken, and that the human person—within the concrete, embodied structures of their existence—is already situated in the world as a hearer.<sup>335</sup> Only after this event of God's self-revelation can theology become a science: a reflective, systematising integration of the Word within the horizon of human understanding.

Rahner's distinction between the philosophy of religion and theology takes on sharper definition when viewed through the lens of human historicity, since theology addresses God's self-revelation within concrete historical events rather than as a purely speculative science. While the philosophy of religion investigates the structural possibility of human openness to the divine, theology concerns itself with concrete historical events—most decisively, creation and the Incarnation.<sup>336</sup> The theological question of God, therefore, cannot be addressed merely as a speculative or intellectual exercise; it must be engaged within the embodied and historical situation in which God has freely chosen to reveal Godself. Theology, in this view, emerges not from abstract reflection but from the concrete event of divine revelation in history. In this sense, the philosophy of religion functions as a “pre-theological” discipline: it prepares the ground for theology by exploring the metaphysical and epistemological conditions under which divine revelation, as an actual event in time, can be received and understood by the human subject.<sup>337</sup>

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334. Rahner, *Hörer des Wortes*, 16; *Hearer of the Word*, 5–6.

335. For further discussion, see Karl Rahner, “Theological Reflections on Monogenism,” in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 1, *God, Christ, Mary and Grace* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd., 1974), 286–290.

336. See Rahner, *Hearer of the Word*, 5–6.

337. See Rahner, *Hörer des Wortes*, 23; *Hearer of the Word*, 5–6.

Building on his account of the philosophy of religion as a pre-theological discipline, Rahner underscores its provisional role, warning against any attempt to treat it as a replacement for theology. While the philosophy of religion may demonstrate that the human subject is ontologically structured for the possibility of divine revelation, it cannot itself produce, guarantee, or contain the content of that revelation.<sup>338</sup> Its role is preparatory, not constitutive. Revelation, in Rahner's account, cannot be deduced from philosophical reflection but must be received as an event that originates beyond the horizon of human reason. Only theology—rooted in God's self-revelation and grounded in the transcendental openness of human nature to this revelation—can affirm that revelation has, indeed, taken place concretely in history, in the Word made flesh.<sup>339</sup> The philosophy of religion, therefore, must remain open to being surpassed by theology, which it can anticipate but never replace.

In this way, Rahner positions the philosophy of religion as a pre-theological horizon that critically reflects on the human subject's transcendental openness to God, yet remains incomplete without the concrete event of revelation. While it can illuminate the metaphysical conditions that make revelation possible, it cannot itself supply its content. Only theology—grounded in God's concrete historical self-revelation—can fulfil what the philosophy of religion can merely anticipate, by uniting the possibility of transcendental experience with the concrete bodily Incarnation of the Word made flesh.

### **5.1.2. Luminosity (*Gelichtetheit*) and the Question of Being**

Advancing from his distinction between philosophy of religion and theology, Rahner turns to the luminosity of being (*Gelichtetheit des Seins*) as the foundational condition that renders the question of being intelligible at all. He opens this reflection by confronting a

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338. See Rahner, *Hearer of the Word*, 13–14.

339. See Rahner, *Hearer of the Word*, 153–54.

foundational metaphysical question: What is being?<sup>340</sup> For Rahner, this question cannot be separated from the epistemological question of the knowledge of being.<sup>341</sup> To inquire about being is, implicitly, to ask why being is intelligible—why reality is something that can be questioned, understood, and known. Rahner’s response to the question of being centres on the concept of luminosity—the idea that being has the capacity to disclose itself; it is structurally oriented toward self-manifestation and intelligibility. In this light, being is not merely present in the world but is present to the human subject as something that can be encountered and known.<sup>342</sup> It is this inner luminosity of being that makes metaphysical and theological questioning possible in the first place.

Building on the epistemological framework of *Geist in Welt* (1939), Rahner articulates luminosity as the self-disclosure of being as it is mediated through the embodied, historical existence of the human person. He emphasizes that the luminosity of being is not a purely intellectual or disembodied insight but is always mediated through concrete human experience in the world—through engagement with an actual material being or a concretized *esse (esse actu)*.<sup>343</sup> From the outset, he anchors his metaphysics of knowledge in the human being as an embodied spirit: a finite subject whose spiritual capacity for knowing emerges only through its historical and material existence. The intelligibility of being, therefore, is inseparable from its concrete embeddedness in the world. Thus, luminosity becomes a central concern for metaphysical anthropology.<sup>344</sup> The human subject is not merely a knower of being but a being who experiences being from within its own existential structures—situated

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340. See Rahner, *Hörer des Wortes*, 45–46; *Hearer of the Word*, 5–6.

341. See Rahner, *Hearer of the Word*, 24–25.

342. See Rahner, *Hearer of the Word*, 28–29.

343. See Rahner, *Hearer of the Word*, 30–31; *Spirit in the World*, 67–71.

344. See Rahner, *Hearer of the Word*, 28.

in the world and yet transcendently open to knowing being beyond the world.<sup>345</sup>

Accordingly, Rahner insists that metaphysics must not begin with detached abstractions but with the lived dimension of human experience in the world.<sup>346</sup>

Developing this account, Rahner shows that the act of questioning itself presupposes and actualizes this luminosity, revealing the original unity between being and the knowledge of being. The luminosity of being emerges precisely in the human act of questioning one's own existence as a being-in-the-world.<sup>347</sup> Every genuine questioning of being presupposes this luminosity; it assumes that being is intelligible, that reality can be grasped and known.<sup>348</sup> The act of questioning, therefore, reflects a transcendental openness in being itself.<sup>349</sup> The human person, as a material and spiritual subject, bears within itself this capacity for luminosity (*Gelichtetheit*)—the capacity to know and to be known.<sup>350</sup> Luminosity is not conferred externally but belongs to the inner structure of being, which is always already oriented toward intelligibility.<sup>351</sup> Following St. Thomas, Rahner affirms that being and the knowledge of being form an original unity: being is inherently knowable, and knowledge is an event of being.<sup>352</sup> Yet this unity does not dissolve the distinction between knower and known; rather, it establishes a relational ontology in which the knower becomes luminous only in relation to the known, and vice versa. Thus, the luminosity of being expresses both the openness of being to human understanding and the openness of the human subject to

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345. See Rahner, *Hearer of the Word*, 29–30.

346. See Rahner, *Hearer of the Word*, 29.

347. See Rahner, *Hearer of the Word*, 30.

348. See Rahner, *Hearer of the Word*, 30.

349. See Rahner, *Hearer of the Word*, 30.

350. See Rahner, *Hearer of the Word*, 29–30.

351. See Rahner, *Hearer of the Word*, 30–33.

352. See Rahner, *Hearer of the Word*, 29–30.

being itself.<sup>353</sup>

Rahner clarifies that the luminosity of being, while grounded in the original unity of knower and known, must be understood as a relational orientation between matter and spirit rather than the speculative identity proposed by Hegelian Idealism. While luminosity must be understood as the original unity of knower and known, subject and object, intellect and sensibility, this understanding must not be confused with pantheistic interpretations, particularly those associated with German Idealism as exemplified by Hegel. Rahner cautions that the notion of being as intrinsically self-luminous and intelligible does not suggest that all being is identical with knowing, thereby eradicating the distinction between subject and object into an idealist monism. He writes:

If being implies the original unity of knowing and of its object, if it belongs to the basic nature of being to be self-present, then it seems impossible that there may exist any being that is not at once knowing and known in identity. But then we have strayed into the basic assertion of the philosophy of German idealism, as it finds its peak in Hegel: Being and knowing are identical. ... It will be enough here, with respect to this panentheistic thesis of German idealism, to explain our statement of the original unity of knowing and being in such a way as to show clearly that it has nothing in common with any kind of pantheism or of idealism (or what is usually known under this name).<sup>354</sup>

Against such idealist interpretations, Rahner affirms that the unity of being and knowing does not entail an identity between the knower (spirit) and the known (matter). He explicitly rejects the Hegelian thesis that “being” is reducible to “thought.” Rather, he interprets the original unity of being and knowing, in *Geist in Welt*, as a relational orientation: matter (*materia prima*), as it becomes self-objectifying in space and time, is naturally directed toward spirit (intellect), which alone confers intelligibility. Being becomes luminous through its encounter with intellect, while the intellect itself remains unintelligible unless it is oriented toward and receives from the concrete givenness of being in sensibility. Thus, for Rahner, the

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353. See Rahner, *Hearer of the Word*, 33–34.

354. Rahner, *Hörer des Wortes*, 59–60; *Hearer of the Word*, 35–36.

unity of knowing and being is a metaphysical relation grounded in concrete human experience—not a speculative identity in the mode of an idealist metaphysics.

In place of the Hegelian conflation of being and thought, Rahner draws on St. Thomas' notion of *reditio subjecti in seipsum* (the return of the subject into itself) to present luminosity as the self-presence of the knower realized in and through embodied encounter with the world.<sup>355</sup> For Rahner, intelligibility, or luminosity, is “an activity by which the knower returns into itself, resulting, therefore, in a self-presence.”<sup>356</sup> In this view, knowing is not the passive reception of external material forms, nor the absorption of being into thought, but the self-awareness of a subject who, in encountering the world, recognises that the known is only possible through the knower or the knowing self. The act of knowing thus involves a return to the self as the condition of the known—an act of self-presence that makes intelligibility possible. Crucially, this return is not a purely intellectual movement but is rooted in the concrete dimension of human experience in the world (*Leiblichkeit*), the historical and embodied ground of all knowing. It is within and through this concrete embodiment that being becomes luminous, and the unity of the knower and the known is realized as the metaphysical structure of the embodied human spirit.<sup>357</sup>

### 5.1.3. “Intensity” (*Seinsmächtigkeit*) and the “Anticipatory Grasp” (*Vorgriff*)

Extending his analysis of luminosity, Rahner develops the concept of *Seinsmächtigkeit* (“intensity of being”) to express the varying degrees to which different beings are luminous and thus actualize their intrinsic intelligibility. Intensity refines the analysis of luminosity by linking it to the extent or degree to which a being can be known.

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355. See Rahner, *Hörer des Wortes*, 56; *Hearer of the Word*, 33.

356. See Rahner, *Hörer des Wortes*, 56; *Hearer of the Word*, 33.

357. See Rahner, *Hearer of the Word*, 33–34.

Rahner explains:

The material insight ... that being is self-presence, self-luminosity, turns into a formal insight: the degree of self-presence, of luminosity for oneself, corresponds to the intensity of being, to the degree in which being belongs to some existent, to the degree in which, notwithstanding its non-being, a being shares in being. And the other way round: the degree of intensity of being shows in the degree in which the being in question is able to return into itself, in which it is capable, by reflecting upon itself, to be luminous for itself.<sup>358</sup>

While luminosity (*Gelichtetheit*) refers to the intrinsic capacity of being to reveal itself and be known, intensity (*Seinsmächtigkeit*) refers to the degree or depth with which this self-luminosity is realized in particular beings. For Rahner, although all beings are in some sense luminous—inasmuch as they exist and are in principle knowable—not all participate equally in this luminosity. A stone, for instance, possesses a minimal degree of luminosity: it exists and can be known, but it lacks the intensity of self-reflection. By contrast, the human person, as a self-reflective subject, actualizes being with greater intensity, for they are capable of a return into themselves (*reditio in seipsum*), becoming conscious of their own being. The intensity of being is thus revealed in the capacity for interiority and self-reflection—the very condition that renders questionability of being possible.

Rahner situates the human person at the apex of material existence by grounding their privileged status in a heightened degree of self-presence, which enables them to stand in reflective relation both to themselves and to the world. In this framework, a hierarchy of being is established according to the degree to which a being is present to itself. Among material entities in the world, the human person occupies a privileged position.<sup>359</sup> This hierarchy of self-presence becomes central to Rahner's argument, particularly in distinguishing the human subject from all other material beings. Human beings surpass other material creatures precisely because they possess a higher degree of self-presence or

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358. Rahner, *Hörer des Wortes*, 61; *Hearer of the Word*, 37.

359. See Rahner, *Hearer of the Word*, 42.

intensity: they are not only aware of themselves, but capable of recognising and knowing other beings as distinct realities. Accordingly, the human person is not merely a bodily object among others, but a bodily subject—a self-reflective centre of consciousness situated in the world, yet capable of standing over against it:

We exist in a world of beings that are our objects. We stand not only in an “environment” as a part of it, as determined by it; to be human is to have a world, which we oppose to ourselves, from which we detach ourselves, in thought and in action. We “judge” the things, by actively dealing with them. We do not simply stand in some kind of cognitive contact with the things of our world, the way we may suppose animals do. We judge what we know and set it up as distinct from ourselves; we make the environment of our physico-biological life into our “object,” into our world. We do not simply feel and experience our environment; we pronounce judgments about the world and about the single objects of which it is made. We are subjects as against objects. When we know, we do not simply become one with the other in some neutral ground between within and without, between subject and object. ... When we step out of ourselves in grasping the things, we also return so completely into ourselves as “subjects,” as distinct from the things we have grasped in stepping out, that we subsist in ourselves as subjects, as separated, as opposed to the outside objects we know. In this way what we experience through our senses turns into objective knowledge in thought.<sup>360</sup>

For Rahner, the human subject is not merely part of its environment but transcends it by actively questioning, judging, and engaging with it. In doing so, sensory experience is transformed into objective knowledge. The human person thereby exists as an original unity of subject and world—a being who not only exists in the world but has a world. Through this self-reflective posture, the entire material world becomes an extension of human bodiliness, accessible to knowledge through the degree of intensity with which each being is present to itself. It is this ontological structure—grounded in human embodiment—that distinguishes the human person as an objective knower among other material creatures.<sup>361</sup>

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360. Rahner, *Hörer des Wortes*, 68–69; *Hearer of the Word*, 42.

361. See also Rahner, *Foundations*, 26–28.

#### 5.1.4. “Anticipatory Grasp” (*Vorgriff*) as the Embodied Horizon of Transcendence

Building on his analysis of intensity, Rahner deepens the discussion by introducing the concept of *Vorgriff* as the dynamic structure through which every finite human engagement with the world is understood as already shaped by a latent orientation toward the unlimited experience of being, ultimately directed toward God. He defines the *Vorgriff* as the “anticipatory grasp” of being that is embedded in human nature.<sup>362</sup> The *Vorgriff* refers to the innate transcendental structure of the human person, orienting them toward the absolute reality of being. It is not the grasp of a specific being, but a dynamic openness to the possibility of grasping all beings—including God, the Absolute Being.<sup>363</sup> In this anticipatory structure, the human person is naturally constituted as a *Vorgriff*, capable of reaching toward the absolute horizon of being itself:

Insofar as the things given in human knowledge are grasped through the *Vorgriff* in the horizon of being as such, they are known as objects of a self-subsisting subject. Insofar as this transcendence happens within a voluntary attitude, these objects are grasped as possible goals of a voluntary attitude, of an affective [*emotionalen*] decision, i.e., as values. This means that being itself is grasped as a value. Thus the human person is the absolute transcendence toward the absolute value, which is pure being, God. Above all, this absolute value is not given as object, but only as the *whither* of the *Vorgriff*, which is always also will. To put it in Scholastic terms, we know it only as “beatitude in general,” not as an object; it is given only as the condition of the possibility of our grasping a finite value.<sup>364</sup>

Whenever human beings know or will the objects of the world, the *Vorgriff* is already

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362. It is difficult to provide an exact English translation of Rahner’s term *Vorgriff*. In ordinary German, the word means “anticipation” (in the sense of reaching ahead to something; see *Collins German-English Dictionary*, 8th ed. [Glasgow: HarperCollins, 2011], s.v. “Vorgriff”). Donceel and Tallon render it as “anticipatory grasp,” while other scholars in the secondary literature prefer “pre-apprehension.” In all cases, prominent Rahner scholars agree that *Vorgriff* refers to a fundamental capacity of human nature that enables the human being to know other beings and objects beyond the self. It is not itself the knowledge of any particular being, but rather the condition that makes the knowledge of all being possible.

363. For further discussion, see Karen Kilby, “Karl Rahner,” in *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology since 1918*, 3rd ed., ed. David F. Ford with Rachel Muers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 97–100.

364. Rahner, *Hörer des Wortes*, 129–30; *Hearer of the Word*, 89.

reaching beyond the particular toward the universal, beyond finite being toward God, the Absolute Being who is never known as a finite object but always anticipated as the transcendental horizon of all knowing and willing. It is in the nature of the *Vorgriff* to reach for the infinite and to long for the fullness of being, even though this fullness can never be comprehensively grasped in its totality.<sup>365</sup>

Extending his account of the *Vorgriff*, Rahner shows how this limitless anticipatory grasp underlies every human act of knowing and willing, such that even without presenting God as an object, it necessarily and implicitly affirms the Absolute as the ultimate fulfilment of human openness to being. For Rahner, transcendental experience is not the experience of a particular object, but the fundamental human capacity, or condition of the possibility, to anticipate and affirm the totality of being as such. This anticipatory grasp is grounded in the limitless horizon of the *Vorgriff*, which always points beyond the world toward that which exceeds it:

The positive limitlessness of the transcendental horizon of human knowledge shows by itself the limitation of all that does not fill this horizon. Hence it is not “nought that noughtens,” but it is the infinity of being, at which the *Vorgriff* aims, that unveils the finiteness of all that is immediately given. ... The same necessity that drives us to anticipate being as such makes us co-affirm the infinite being of God. It is true that the *Vorgriff* does not immediately put God as an object before the mind (*Geist*), since, as the condition of the possibility of all knowledge of objects, the *Vorgriff* itself never represents an object in itself. But in this *Vorgriff* as the necessary and always already fulfilled condition of every human knowledge and action, the existence of an absolute being, hence of God, is always already co-affirmed, even though not represented.<sup>366</sup>

Transcendental experience affirms the real possibility of God’s existence—not as a direct object of intellectual knowledge, but as the necessary horizon within which all finite knowledge of being converge. Because the *Vorgriff* intends real being, not merely a

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<sup>365</sup> See also Rahner, *Foundations*, 33–34.

<sup>366</sup> Rahner, *Hörer des Wortes*, 80–82; *Hearer of the Word*, 50–51.

hypothetical possibility, it necessarily and implicitly co-affirms the reality of the Absolute Being as its transcendental horizon.

Robert C. Tallon expresses Rahner's insight by interpreting the *Vorgriff* as an irreducibly embodied anticipation, in which sensibility and "spirit" (intellect) together open the horizon of all being and orient the human person toward relational, ethical, and historical fulfilment. For Tallon, the *Vorgriff* is not knowledge in the proper sense but a transcendental condition that makes all acts of knowing possible. It is a built-in *a priori* structure of human consciousness, the dynamic ground of every encounter with being.<sup>367</sup> This *a priori* structure expresses the human person's essential openness to God (*capax Dei*)—the structural capacity for receiving divine self-communication.<sup>368</sup> The *Vorgriff* thus reveals that the human person is a spiritual being and cannot be reduced to a purely biological mechanism or substance. In this context, human bodiliness is a spirited bodiliness, capable of self-transcendence and openness to the world, to others, and to God. In this way, Tallon interprets the *Vorgriff* as a deeply embodied phenomenon:

My body (i.e., embodiment as consciousness's first otherness) is a *Vorgriff*, a corporeal, connatural anticipation of another person. As emanation of spirit, sensibility makes consciousness present in space-time as affection (*Einfühlung, Urempfindung*), then as cognition and volition. Thus Rahner uses *Woraufhin* (whither, whereunto) both for spirit's (intellect's) anticipation of its horizon (being, truth) and for sensibility's anticipation of its horizon (beings in space-time). To demystify *Vorgriff* is to show its root meaning in intentionality emphatically as embodied, and thus we get beyond a purely cognitive reading of *Vorgriff* and recognize in *HW* that *Vorgriff* opens the horizon of all being (whether or not we say [with Rousselot] that the human "I am able to" toward being stems from a deeper *capax Dei*, so that the "mystical" makes possible the "ethical" (the other person) and the historical (philosophy of religion, the anticipated advent of God in space-time)).<sup>369</sup>

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367. Cf. Andrew Tallon, introduction to *Hearer of the Word: Laying the Foundation for a Philosophy of Religion*, by Karl Rahner, trans. Joseph Donceel (New York: Continuum, 1994), xiv. Tallon notes that Rahner is explicit in affirming that the act designated *Vorgriff* is not itself necessarily cognitive, but rather the transcendental condition that makes cognition possible, together with the other two fundamental modes of consciousness—affection and volition.

368. For an extended discussion, see Rahner, *Hearer of the Word*, 51–56.

369. Tallon, introduction to *Hearer of the Word*, xvi.

For Tallon, the *Vorgriff* does not merely anticipate being in a formal or abstract cognitive sense; it expresses itself through human embodiment (sensibility) as the pre-conceptual, *a priori* human openness to God. Thus, sensibility, far from being an obstacle to transcendental openness, becomes its necessary condition: the human person is a bodily subject whose very materiality is suffused with spiritual intentionality.<sup>370</sup> The *Vorgriff*, then, is the transcendental horizon that grounds finite human openness towards God, the absolute horizon of all being.

### 5.1.5 The Tension Between Luminosity and the Possibility of Revelation

Rahner addresses the apparent paradox that arises from affirming both the intrinsic luminosity of being and the human person's radical openness to the Absolute, questioning whether such *a priori* structures render historical divine revelation superfluous. In other words, if being is intrinsically intelligible, and the human person is radically open to the possibility of possessing total being, why is divine revelation necessary at all?<sup>371</sup> If humanity is naturally structured to grasp the whole of being, including the Absolute Being, what additional role does a distinct, historical "Word from God" (divine revelation) play in this dynamic? Does revelation truly add something to what is already structurally inscribed in the transcendental nature of the human subject?<sup>372</sup>

Building on his account of the *Vorgriff*, Rahner contends that divine revelation cannot be conceived as the necessary outcome of humanity's transcendental openness to being, but

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370. Kilby also points to the centrality of concrete reality for understanding both the *Vorgriff* and transcendental experience in Rahner: "Just as the awareness of God given in the *Vorgriff* is not ever had on its own, apart from our dealings with the world, and just as the experience of grace is not a separate experience among others but an existential, so transcendental experience is not something occurring in isolation. It is always given only in an experience of the concrete, the particular, the finite. Rahner characteristically expresses this point by pairing 'the transcendental' with either 'the categorical' (the realm of that which can be put into categories, that which can be pinned down and grasped by concepts) or 'the historical.'" (Kilby, "Karl Rahner," 99).

371. See Rahner, *Hearer of the Word*, 55.

372. See Rahner, *Hearer of the Word*, 56–58.

must be recognized as the free and unpredictable self-gift of a God who remains essentially hidden to the finite spirit. Revelation is not the necessary outcome of the transcendental unfolding of the spirit (*Geist*) in history. Rather, it is a gratuitous act of divine self-giving, with a hidden God freely entering human history as love. Rahner writes:

Speaking very generally, the difficulty consists in this: ... in principle every being is always already manifest, and does not need to be revealed. In this event revelation would be nothing else than the immanent and necessary unfolding of this openness of being that is from the start always present in the spirit as such. ... Thus revelation would be nothing else than our spiritualization, as it slowly progresses according to the inner law of human nature itself. ... Since this difficulty derives already from the first statement of our general ontology, about the luminosity of being, it is our first duty to look for its solution within this ontology. ... Humanity stands before God as before one who is at least for a time unknown. For God is the Infinite, whom we can know as infinite only by denying the finite and referring to that which lies beyond any finiteness. ... If known in this way, God remains hidden in the positive content of divine infinity. ... We shall understand the possibility of a divine revelation as a free act of God only if we can establish that God remains essentially hidden before every finite spirit as such, and not only before humanity in the actual structure of human knowledge. ... Only then can God's actual speaking to us, if it really happens, be understood for what it is: the unpredictable act of God's personal love, before which we fall upon our knees in worship.<sup>373</sup>

Rahner thus rejects any notion that divine revelation arises necessarily from the *a priori* transcendental structure of the human spirit. While the human person is indeed oriented towards God through their inherent luminosity and intensity, this does not imply that God, as Absolute Being, is naturally grasped, as a goal, within such experience. Revelation presupposes not only the limitations inherent in human finitude but also the radical otherness of God. Precisely because God remains essentially hidden to the finite human spirit, revelation must be understood as a free and unpredictable act of divine love—beginning from a free creation to its definitive self-revelation in the Incarnate Word, made flesh.

Rahner concludes that the finite and contingent nature of human existence constitute

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373. Rahner, *Hearer of the Word*, 57–64.

the very ground for the possibility of divine revelation. It is precisely through creaturely limitation that the Infinite can disclose itself as the absolutely transcendent Other.

Transcendental experience does not originate from an autonomous or necessary human orientation towards Absolute Being; rather, it is made possible through the gracious self-revelation of the hidden God. The divine reveals itself through human finiteness and historicity, so that the human person, precisely in their creaturely limitations, can encounter the divine as the absolutely transcendent Other. Rahner explains:

Insofar as we must inquire we affirm our own finite thrownness [*Geworfenheit*]; insofar as we *must* inquire, we affirm it necessarily. And as we affirm it necessarily, we affirm our existence—in and despite its thrownness, as unconditioned, as absolute. In other words: because the affirmation of the *contingent* fact is unavoidably *necessary*, the contingency itself reveals something absolute: the unavoidable way in which the contingent fact demands to be affirmed. Despite its contingency it excludes the possibility of being denied. This implies that humanity necessarily assumes a relation of absolute affirmation with regard to our finite and thrown [*geworfenen*] existence ... Transcendental experience is only possible through divine revelation, with divine infinity and incomprehensibility revealing itself through human finiteness and historicity, so that the human person, precisely in their finiteness and history can experience the divine as the absolute “other” of revelation.<sup>374</sup>

It is precisely the limitation inherent in human creatureliness that accounts for a possible historical revelation. By necessarily affirming its own contingency and finiteness, the human subject is already directed toward Absolute Being. Thus, transcendental experience becomes possible only through revelation. In and through this finite existence, the Infinite reveals itself as the absolute “Other” of revelation. Divine revelation, then, is not the completion of transcendental experience but the ground and condition of its possibility.

Rahner identifies and critiques two distortions of transcendental experience which, by neglecting the mediating role of historicity and grace, obscure the essential distinction between humanity’s transcendental openness to God and the absolute gratuity of divine

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374. Rahner, *Hörer des Wortes*, 107; *Hearer of the Word*, 67–68.

revelation. First, he rejects the view of “mystical piety,” which holds that the human person can access the Absolute Being without mediation of their finite worldly nature. This view, he argues, fails to account for the historical and creaturely significance of human existence.<sup>375</sup> Second, he challenges the view that every intellectual nature is naturally blessed in itself and does not require the light of revelation to be raised to the beatific vision.<sup>376</sup> Both views, Rahner warns, dismantle the necessary distinction between transcendental experience and the absolute gratuity of divine grace. While the former downplays the significance of historicity and human embodiment, the latter undermines the absolute gratuity of grace.

## 5.2. Bodiliness (*Leiblichkeit*) as the Historical Ground of Revelation

This section examines Rahner’s account of divine revelation as a historical event, demonstrating how the interplay of human embodiment, historicity, and transcendental openness grounds revelation within the concrete, material dimension of existence (*Leiblichkeit*). To explore this view, this section will address the following themes: (1) historicity and the free “listener,” and (2) bodiliness as the concrete locus of divine revelation.

### 5.2.1. Historicity and the Freedom of the “Listener” (*Hörende*)

Rahner situates divine revelation within history, where God’s World encounters the finite human person in the conditions of their concrete embodied existence. He begins with a decisive claim that if revelation is to occur, it must be heard within history by a “listener.”<sup>377</sup> This claim counters the temptation to conceive of divine revelation as a purely supernatural

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375. See Rahner, *Hearer of the Word*, 61–62.

376. See Rahner, *Hearer of the Word*, 62–63.

377. See Rahner, *Hearer of the Word*, 41–43.

event—a *mysterium stricte dictum* (a mystery in the strict sense), accessible only through the light of faith and detached from the historical and embodied conditions of human existence.<sup>378</sup> According to Rahner, historicity is the site of revelation, and it is therefore inadequate for a proper theology of revelation to overlook the historical dimension of human existence in the world, the concrete locus of revelation itself. As Rahner insists, if revelation is indeed a Word addressed to the human person, then God must speak this Word where human beings actually are—in their finite, material, and historical embeddedness in the world:

We must understand historicity as belonging to our basic nature. As long as this had not been done, we might always imagine that, because of our spiritual nature, we might believe that we can try to put ourselves, as spirit, above our history, to emancipate ourselves from it, and thus to exclude history from the start as the possible place of a revelation. As spirit we possess the absolute possibility of attempting this, not of succeeding in it. Thus we must show that turning toward our history is an inner moment of our spiritual nature. If we succeed in this, we will have also shown that the place of a possible revelation of God, namely, our openness for all being as such, is also necessarily situated within human history.<sup>379</sup>

Here, Rahner affirms that historicity belongs to the very structure of what it means to be human. This is foundational to his theology of revelation: the transcendental openness of the human spirit (*Vorgriff*) towards Absolute Being is not exercised independently of time and space but is necessarily mediated within the concrete historicity of human existence in the world. Revelation, therefore, is only genuinely received through this openness, because it is addressed to a subject who is finite, materially embodied, and situated in history—a “hearer,” who listens to the Word of revelation within the concrete historical conditions of existence.<sup>380</sup>

Rahner advances his theology of revelation by presenting it as a fundamentally

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378. See Rahner, *Hearer of the Word*, 13–14.

379. Rahner, *Hörer des Wortes*, 144–45; *Hearer of the Word*, 95.

380 See also Rahner, *Foundations*, 153–56.

relational event, in which God's free Word addresses the finite, embodied, and historically situated human subject, whose freedom to respond is integral to the revelatory encounter. Revelation is a relational event: a divine Word freely addressed to a finite human subject.<sup>381</sup> The Word of revelation is not reducible to the transcendental dynamism of the human *Vorgriff* towards Absolute Being, but remains an "Otherness"—an absolute, gratuitous divine self-communication that draws the human being into a genuine and free relationship with God.<sup>382</sup> Revelation, then, is not imposed upon the human subject by virtue of their inner transcendental openness (*Vorgriff*) towards Absolute Being, but a free Word spoken to a free being who can accept or reject it.<sup>383</sup> Rahner brings this line of thought to a theological conclusion:

We are essentially human in humankind; in space and time we carry out the work of our freedom together with the whole of humankind. We live as historical beings ... humanity is the place of a possible revelation of the free God, since we had discovered that we are the beings who, on account of our transcendence, stand in free love before the free God of a possible revelation. ... Finally we have already shown that, if we wished to establish the place of a possible revelation more precisely than through the absolute transcendence of the human spirit and through the word, this might only be done by making clearer the human peculiarities of this transcendence and thus the peculiar nature of the word of God as perceptible to our human nature.<sup>384</sup>

For Rahner, the transcendental openness of the human spirit (*Vorgriff*) towards Absolute Being can only be realized historically and materially, in the world. The listener, as the one to whom God's Word is addressed, is a historically situated, and free subject in the world. Historicity belongs to the very structure of the human person's transcendental openness towards God, and must be acknowledged as the necessary condition for the possibility of

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381. See Rahner, *Hearer of the Word*, 72–73.

382. See Rahner, *Hearer of the Word*, 100–01.

383. See Rahner, *Hearer of the Word*, 105–07.

384. Rahner, *Hörer des Wortes*, 173–74; *Hearer of the Word*, 117.

divine revelation. This means that the locus of a possible divine revelation must be the concrete historical and embodied dimension of human existence in the world (*Leiblichkeit*).

### 5.2.2. The Human Person as the Locus of Divine Revelation

Building on his claim that revelation must occur within the historical existence of a free listener, Rahner now grounds this possibility in the very constitution of the human person as a unity of spirit and body, whose spirituality is always realized through embodied, material existence. He turns explicitly to humanity as the locus of divine revelation, defining the human person as the infinity of the absolute spiritual openness for being in time and space.<sup>385</sup> The human person is capable of reaching toward the perfection of truth and goodness, including the possibility of listening to a divine revelation by virtue of their spiritual nature or transcendental structure (*Vorgriff*).<sup>386</sup> He writes:

Human beings are spirits in such a way that, in order to become spirit, we enter and we have ontically always already entered into otherness, into matter, and so into the world. This is not simply another statement about human nature to be added to the assertion of our spiritual nature. It is an inner determination of our spirituality itself. ... Our human spirit is receptive—*anima tabula rasa*—and because of its receptivity this spirit needs, as its own, indispensable means, produced by itself, a sense power through which it may strive toward its own goal, the grasping of being as such. In this sense to be human is to be sense-endowed spirituality [*sinnliche Geistigkeit*]. The intellectual soul [*anima intellective*], i.e., the spirit, really and essentially informs the body [*est vere et essentialiter corpus informans*].<sup>387</sup>

For Rahner, the human person is essentially material and embodied in nature. Yet this material nature is always expressed as a sense-endowed spirituality (*sinnliche Geistigkeit*). To be spiritual does not mean existing apart from the body; rather, spirituality becomes actual in and through matter and history as “sense-endowed” spirituality. The human spirit, perfects

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385. Rahner, *Hörer des Wortes*, 89; *Hearer of the Word*, 55.

386. See also Rahner, *Hearer of the Word*, 57–58.

387. Rahner, *Hörer des Wortes*, 161; *Hearer of the Word*, 106–07.

and realizes itself historically in and through its bodily form, needing *Leiblichkeit* to move toward its goal—namely, God, its absolute transcendent fulfilment. Thus, the human spirit is always a materially embodied spirit.

It becomes clear that, according to Rahner, bodiliness necessarily draws the human spirit into history, where the divine Word, already spoken in creation, can be heard and freely received. It is on account of the human person's embodied orientation toward history that makes it possible for them to hear and respond to God's Word of revelation in the concrete world.<sup>388</sup> This Word, as Rahner explains, is already spoken by God in creation and precedes any human response.<sup>389</sup> Humanity finds the Word already given within the structures of creation and history, and because humans are material or bodily spirits, they are necessarily drawn toward history, where the Word of God is encountered as always already present:

Revelation is possible. ... The place where such a revelation may occur is our history. The historical appearance in the world may, in the human word, make known the free word of the God of revelation. ... We are historical beings, in and because of our transcendent openness for being as such, which makes us refer to God and thus to a possible revelation. In order to stand before being as such, we must turn toward the appearance ... which comprises also the history of humanity, and, insofar as we are always human in humankind, also the history of humankind. Therefore turning toward history is not something optional for us. Because of our specific human spirituality, it is always already basically imposed upon us.<sup>390</sup>

Divine revelation is possible in the world because the human spirit is radically open to history. God reveals Godself freely, and this revelation occurs within history, the place where the free Word meets the free listener. Our historicity is not optional. It is imposed upon the human spirit, drawing it towards the world, and ultimately, towards divine revelation itself.

Building on this account, Rahner stresses that historicity situates divine revelation

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388. See also Rahner, *Hearer of the Word*, 52–54.

389. See Rahner, *Hearer of the Word*, 142–43.

390. Rahner, *Hörer des Wortes*, 201–02; *Hearer of the Word*, 137–38.

within a relationship of reciprocal freedom between God and the human listener. While historicity is imposed as that transcendental horizon of the human spirit, it does not constitute revelation itself. Revelation remains a free act of the Absolute Being. God may or may not choose to reveal Godself, and the human person may or may not respond in freedom. Revelation though always a historical event, retains its character as a free offer, one that can be either accepted or rejected. Rahner writes:

With regard to every finite being pure being stands in its total luminosity as the supremely *free* being. For our philosophy of religion this means that the God before whom we stand in our transcendence, is the free one. The possibilities of God's freedom are not exhausted by the free creation of the finite spirit. Hence, in divine freedom, God stands before us as what is the most deeply hidden, as self-revelation to us in the openness of our transcendence only when and insofar as God freely wills. ... For our philosophy of religion this means that as finite spirits our openness for the free God of a possible revelation is not as such a purely theoretical concern of a neutral spirituality, but it is, as such, a free decision, *religio*. ... The human person as a finite spirit stands in free decision before the free God of a possible revelation.<sup>391</sup>

Rahner presents revelation as grounded in mutual freedom: the freedom of God to reveal and the freedom of the human person to respond. The human openness to revelation is not merely theoretical or structural; it is existential and volitional. Even though the Word of revelation is already spoken in creation and history, it never imposes itself. Revelation invites a response, and the human person must yield to it or turn away from it in freedom.

Rahner concludes his account of divine revelation by identifying the Incarnation of Jesus Christ as the definitive and unsurpassable self-revelation of God, in which the divine Word becomes fully human.<sup>392</sup> In the Incarnation, divine revelation is no longer merely anticipated, implicit, or hidden; it becomes fully concrete, historical, and embodied.<sup>393</sup> The

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391. Rahner, *Hörer des Wortes*, 207–08; *Hearer of the Word*, 140–41.

392. See Rahner, *Hearer of the Word*, 144.

393. See Rahner, *Hearer of the Word*, 144–45.

Incarnation is the consummation of revelation: the self-communication of God in the flesh, addressed within the world and to the world. Revelation, therefore, attains its fullest form within the historical and embodied dimension of human existence (*Leiblichkeit*). In this view, embodied human subjectivity emerges as the privileged locus of revelation, since this finite, embodied human subject to whom the divine Word is addressed in history, is the same embodied subject that Word has freely become in the historical Incarnation of Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>394</sup>

In closing, Rahner's *Hörer des Wortes* develops a metaphysical anthropology in which the human person, as a finite, historical, and embodied spirit, is structurally open to divine revelation. The philosophy of religion can demonstrate this openness, but it remains only preparatory: it identifies the transcendental horizon of the human spirit (*Vorgriff*), without itself providing the content of this revelation. Theology, on the other hand, begins not with human questioning but with the concrete Word of God spoken in history, which can only be received by a hearer already constituted in openness to the divine.

Central to this framework are Rahner's concepts of luminosity and intensity. Being is intrinsically luminous, capable of manifesting itself, but realized in differing degrees of intensity. The human person, distinguished by self-presence and freedom, stands at the apex of this hierarchy. Through the *Vorgriff*, humanity anticipates being as such and so affirms, implicitly and unthematically, the Absolute as the transcendental goal of all human knowing and willing. Yet, historicity and transcendental human openness does not generate divine revelation; it merely renders it possible. Revelation remains a free and unpredictable act of God, who discloses Godself not as a historical necessity but as the absolute and loving gift of Godself to humanity and the world.

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394. For further discussion, see Rahner, *Hearer of the Word*, 146–49.

Divine revelation culminates in the Incarnation, where God's love becomes fully actual and embodied in the flesh of Christ. In Jesus of Nazareth, the transcendental openness of the human spirit and the absolute freedom of divine love converge, showing that the fullness of revelation occurs only where God and humanity meet in history and bodiliness. Thus Rahner's *Hörer des Wortes* lays the foundations for his embodied theology of grace, Christology, anthropology, ecclesiology, and eschatology.

**PART II**

**THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON *LEIBLICHKEIT* IN KARL RAHNER**

## Chapter 6

### **Bodiliness and the Experience of Grace in the World**

Geoffrey Kelly characterises Rahner's entire theological enterprise as a "theology of grace," marked by its consistent emphasis on the historical and relational dimensions of God's self-communication. Unlike traditions that treat grace as an abstract divine quality or an external supernatural addition to nature, Rahner presents it as the concrete and personal self-revelation of God within the embodied conditions of human existence. Grace is neither superimposed upon an autonomous nature, nor understood as an accidental supplement; rather, it constitutes the very condition of human existence. In this way, grace is not an occasional divine intervention in nature but the abiding self-gift of God that defines humanity in its deepest essence.

This chapter examines Rahner's theology of grace as the free self-communication of God in history, a vision that affirms the intrinsic unity of nature and grace, spirit and matter, body and soul—culminating in the Incarnation as the definitive embodiment of grace in nature. For Rahner, the human person is not merely a recipient of grace but the locus in which revelation becomes historically concrete. His theology decisively rejects the dualisms common in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Neo-Scholasticism, especially the rigid separations between nature and grace, matter and spirit. Instead, he articulates a relational and historical vision in which grace constitutes the natural horizon of human existence. At the centre of Rahner's theology of grace, stands the Incarnation, in which God's self-communication in history, the fullness of grace, assumes human bodiliness as its permanent condition.

The chapter moves in three sections. Section one situates Rahner's theology of grace in dialogue with certain aspects of Neo-Scholasticism, contrasting its extrinsic and abstract

teachings on grace with a relational existential account grounded in uncreated grace. Section two turns to the experiential mediation of grace in history, highlighting its presence in both Christian and non-Christian contexts and culminating in the Incarnation as the decisive revelation of God's grace. The final section advances Rahner's critique of Neo-Scholastic extrinsecism, introducing his notion of the "supernatural existential" as a theological alternative framework that affirms the inseparability of nature and grace in real life while safeguarding their distinction at the same time.

### 6.1. Understanding Grace: Neo-Scholasticism in Context

This section explores Rahner's theology of grace within a Neo-Scholastic framework. In his early essay "Zur scholastischen Begrifflichkeit der ungeschaffenen Gnade" (1939), Rahner challenges a certain Neo-Scholastic teaching on grace as a purely abstract and supernatural reality externally added to human nature.<sup>395</sup> In doing so, he relocates the locus of grace within the concrete, historical, and embodied dimension of human existence. This section examines two central themes: (1) the distinction and relationship between created and uncreated grace, and (2) the intrinsic relationship between grace and human nature.

#### 6.1.1. The Priority of Uncreated Grace over Created Grace

Rahner begins his analysis of grace by clarifying the distinction between uncreated grace—understood as the indwelling presence of the personal Spirit of God in nature—and created grace—understood as the transformative effect of this divine indwelling presence within the human subject. This distinction addresses a longstanding and central theological

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395. See Karl Rahner, "Zur scholastischen Begrifflichkeit der ungeschaffenen Gnade," in *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 5/1, *De Gratia Christi: Schriften zur Gnadenlehre*, ed. Roman A. Siebenrock and Albert Raffelt, with Theodor Schneider (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2015), 40–62; "Some Implications of the Scholastic Concept of Uncreated Grace," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 1, *God, Christ, Mary and Grace*, trans. Cornelius Ernst (Baltimore, MD: Helicon Press, 1961), 319–46.

concern: the relationship between created and uncreated grace. Drawing heavily on Pauline anthropology, Rahner defines uncreated grace (*ungeschaffene Gnade*) as the “personal Spirit of God” (*den persönlichen Gottesgeist*), that is, the divine self-communication by which God freely offers God’s very self to the human person as the principle of sanctification and justification.<sup>396</sup> Because this grace is not a created entity but the personal indwelling of God’s Spirit in creation, it is termed “uncreated.”<sup>397</sup> In contrast, “created grace” refers to the effect or consequence of this divine indwelling: the real transformation that takes place in the human subject who receives and is sanctified by God’s indwelling Spirit. Created grace thus signifies the inner renewal and justification of the human person, made possible by the presence of uncreated grace. Rahner explains:

It follows that for St Paul man’s inner sanctification is first and foremost a communication of the personal Spirit of God, that is to say, in scholastic terms, a *donum increatum*; and he sees every created grace ... as a consequence and a manifestation of the possession of this uncreated grace. Thus at least from the point of view of his concept of pneuma and its structure, we should say with St Paul that we possess our pneumatic being (our ‘created sanctifying grace’) because we have the personal Pneuma of God. The converse proposition, corresponding to the ordinary viewpoint of the scholastic teaching on grace (‘God’s Pneuma is present in us in a special way because we have created grace’), lacks the same measure of immediate and explicit support in St Paul.<sup>398</sup>

From this Pauline perspective, the sanctification of the human person originates not with created grace but with the gift of uncreated grace—that is, with God’s indwelling Spirit. Created grace does not serve as the precondition for the reception of uncreated grace; rather, it is its effect. It signifies the transformed and sanctified state of the human person that results from God’s indwelling presence. In this light, it is more accurate to affirm that one possesses created grace because one has received uncreated grace—not vice versa.

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396. See Rahner, “Zur scholastischen Begrifflichkeit,” 42; “Some Implications,” 321.

397. See Rahner, “Some Implications,” 321–22.

398. Rahner, “Zur scholastischen Begrifflichkeit,” 42; “Some Implications,” 322.

Rahner critiques tendencies in Neo-Scholasticism to subordinate uncreated grace primarily as a consequence or reward of created grace, conceiving created grace as the conscious participation in divine life through personal holiness and moral virtue.<sup>399</sup> Despite the diversity of scholastic theories on this position, Rahner identifies a common structural pattern: uncreated grace, or God's indwelling presence in the justified person, is regarded as dependent upon the prior existence of created grace. In this schema, created grace is interpreted as an entitative elevation or supernatural modification of human nature, cultivated through a life of virtue, which disposes the person for uncreated grace or God's indwelling Spirit.<sup>400</sup> Uncreated grace is thereby treated as a function of created grace, rather than its source. The Spirit's presence is viewed as conditioned by the sanctified state of the person—as if God's self-communication becomes possible only where created grace has already prepared the soul to receive it:

It is true of all the scholastic theories that they see God's indwelling and his conjunction with the justified man as based exclusively upon created grace. In virtue of the fact that created grace is imparted to the soul God imparts himself to it and dwells in it. Thus what we call uncreated grace (i.e. God as bestowing himself upon man) is a function of created grace ... the formal basis of the analogical supernatural participation in God's nature through entitative assimilation of man to God's spirituality and holiness (*consortium formale*) ... . For our purpose it makes no difference how the various theories go on to explain the way in which created grace provides a basis for a new relation between man and the God of grace ... . For in each case the indwelling of the Spirit in the justified man by grace is seen merely as a *consequence* of the bestowal of created grace, as the end-term of a (categorical) relationship of man to God given with created grace.<sup>401</sup>

In this Neo-Scholastic context, created grace is treated as the necessary preparation of the soul for God's indwelling Spirit: only once this disposition is established does God bestow God's personal Spirit in the human soul. Rahner decisively reverses this scholastic ordering.

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399. See Rahner, "Some Implications," 324.

400. See Rahner, "Some Implications," 324.

401. Rahner, "Zur scholastischen Begrifflichkeit," 44; "Some Implications," 324.

For him, uncreated grace—the self-bestowal of the personal Spirit of God—is primary. Created grace is not a prerequisite for God’s indwelling Spirit but its consequence: it is the sanctified and transformed state of the person who has already received God’s Spirit from the beginning of creation.

Rahner reconfigures the scholastic distinction between created and uncreated grace by insisting that uncreated grace, as God’s indwelling Spirit itself, is the ground of sanctification, rather than a consequence of habitual or created grace. While acknowledging the internal coherence and theological value of the scholastic model, he critiques Neo-Scholastic tendencies that subordinate uncreated grace to created grace. Drawing on biblical and patristic sources, he retrieves the perspective in which grace is described as flowing from God’s self-gift to the forgiven sinner: “created grace as a consequence of God’s communication of himself to the man whose sins have been forgiven.”<sup>402</sup> In this way, Rahner does not reject outrightly the scholastic framework regarding human sanctification, but reframes it by introducing a quasi-formal causality—where the divine indwelling itself causes the sanctification—rather than an efficient causality that would require created grace to precede the sanctification by the Spirit.<sup>403</sup> God’s indwelling, in Rahner’s view, is not the result of a soul already elevated by habitual grace; rather, God’s free and immediate bestowal of the Spirit in the human person is the condition of the possibility for the soul’s sanctification in the first place. For Rahner, uncreated grace precedes and grounds all created grace, which is its effect. Human sanctification (created grace) is therefore the fruit, not the precondition of God’s indwelling Spirit (uncreated grace), so that the believer possesses created grace only because they have first received the personal Spirit of God within their

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402. Rahner, “Some Implications,” 325.

403. See Rahner, “Some Implications,” 329. See also William V. Dych, *Karl Rahner* (London: Continuum, 1992; reissued 2000), 38–39.

embodied human nature from the beginning of creation.

### 6.1.2. Grace and the Structure of Human Nature

Extending his account of uncreated grace, Rahner emphasizes that human nature is never a “pure” autonomous reality awaiting a supernatural elevation, but is always already constituted, from the very beginning, as a graced existence. The essential insight is that grace is neither something externally superimposed upon a “pure” or autonomous nature, nor is the indwelling of the Spirit dependent upon the prior presence of created grace. Rather, from the very beginning, human nature—in its concrete, historical, and bodily existence—is bestowed with the indwelling presence of the divine Spirit. The material and finite dimension of human existence is always already graced. Grace is not added to human nature as an external gift; it is constitutive of what it means to be human.<sup>404</sup>

The sanctification of the human person does not originate in created grace; it begins with God’s indwelling Spirit in human nature from the very beginning of creation. The Spirit is not bestowed into the human soul because the human person has been sanctified by the created effects of grace; rather, it is the indwelling presence of the Spirit in human nature that makes such sanctification possible. The human person, as an embodied historical subject, thus lives from the outset within the sphere of God’s indwelling Spirit. Uncreated grace, in this view, is understood as the ontological structure that enables human nature to be supernaturally elevated into participation in divine life, rather than as the outcome of virtuous acts of knowledge and love.<sup>405</sup> As Rahner expresses it, the relationship between grace and

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404. See Karl Rahner, *Nature and Grace: Dilemmas in the Modern Church*, trans. Dinah Wharton (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1964), 116–17.

405. Cf. Jennifer Erin Beste, *God and the Victim: Traumatic Intrusions on Grace and Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 53–86. Beste (b. 1972) critiques Rahner’s theology of grace as “irrelevant” or “ill-equipped” to address concrete suffering, especially trauma. Drawing on the experiences of women who have endured incestuous abuse, she argues that Rahner’s focus on “consciousness” as the basis of self-transcendence fails to account for how trauma fragments subjectivity and impairs the capacity for conscious intimacy with both others and God. In such cases, God is often perceived as distant, judgemental, or ashamed, which undermines Rahner’s vision of freedom and grace. As Beste concludes: “Rahner’s well-known writings

nature “is already posited [in human nature] independently of an actually exercised apprehension of the threefold God by man in knowledge and love.”<sup>406</sup>

Rahner aligns this vision with certain strands within the broader scholastic tradition. For example, Alexander of Hales distinguishes between *gratia increata* (uncreated grace) as *perfectio complens* (the perfection that completes), and *gratia creata* (created grace) as *dispositio ad susceptionem* (the disposition toward reception).<sup>407</sup> Bonaventure similarly affirms the primacy of uncreated grace, identifying the Holy Spirit as the true and personal gift of God’s self, already present in Scripture and faith, while created grace functions as its concrete expression.<sup>408</sup> Even Thomas Aquinas, though often treating created grace as an instrumental *habitus*, asserts that grace arises directly from the divine presence in human nature itself: “*gratia enim causatur in homine ex praesentia divinitatis, sicut lumen in aere ex praesentia solis*” (for grace is caused in the human being by the presence of the divine, just as light is caused in the air by the presence of the sun).<sup>409</sup> Thomas further explains that the divine persons leave behind certain “gifts” in human nature, such as wisdom and love, “*per proprium sigillum*” (through their own sealing), confirming that human sanctification is a direct result of the divine presence rather than its cause.<sup>410</sup> Thus, for Rahner, grace is not initially a moral status or juridical standing, nor is it earned through virtuous acts of knowledge and love.

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on grace and freedom do not explicitly acknowledge the severe extent to which interpersonal harm can damage our freedom to receive and respond to God’s grace” (see Beste, *God and the Victim*, 85–86). She therefore turns to feminist theories of Judith Butler and Diana Meyers as correctives to Rahner’s account of subjectivity.

406. Rahner, “Some Implications,” 336.

407. See Rahner, “Some Implications,” 337.

408. See Rahner, “Some Implications,” 337.

409. See Rahner, “Some Implications,” 338.

410. Rahner, “Some Implications,” 338.

Grace is, from the outset, the real presence of God's Spirit within human nature. It is not first a supernatural virtue or habit but a concrete ontological union between the divine and the human, established by God's own initiative and expressed in the very structure of finite, human nature. This union constitutes the transcendental, or more precisely the trans-categorical structure of human nature that makes justification and sanctification possible. As Rahner puts it: "if created grace is given, so too necessarily by that very fact uncreated grace, and hence the whole grace of justification, is communicated to man."<sup>411</sup>

The theological implication of this position is significant for Rahner's anthropology. Human nature, in its historicity, finitude, and embodied existence (*Leiblichkeit*)—is always already elevated by the indwelling of God's Spirit. Human nature is not a neutral substratum awaiting to be perfected by grace; it is the site in which grace unfolds as a free gift.<sup>412</sup> Consequently, grace is not an external addition to nature but radiates from within it, as the indwelling of God's Spirit in the soul. In this way, Rahner's theology of uncreated grace culminates in a radical affirmation of the sacredness of nature itself: the concrete, historical, and bodily dimension of the human person (*Leiblichkeit*) is the original and enduring locus of God's indwelling presence.

## 6.2. God as Grace in the World

This section explores the concrete experience of God as grace in the world, with particular attention to the mediation of grace in both Christian and non-Christian religious contexts. In his essay "Theos im Neuen Testament" (1942), Rahner affirms that God's self-communication to the world—which reaches its definitive climax in the historical Incarnation of Jesus Christ—is always mediated through the concrete, embodied, and historical

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411. Rahner, "Some Implications," 342.

412. See Rahner, *Nature and Grace*, 135.

conditions of human existence.<sup>413</sup> From the very beginning, grace is not an abstract or ahistorical reality, but a dynamic, historical presence, communicated through creation and human nature through the Holy Spirit. This fundamental orientation grounds Rahner's theology of revelation within a broader theological anthropology. To develop these themes further, this section will examine three concerns: (1) the experience of grace in Christian and non-Christian religions; (2) the historical dimension of divine self-revelation; and (3) the Incarnation as the definitive, personal revelation of grace in the world.

### 6.2.1. The Experience of Grace in Christian and Non-Christian Religions

Building on his conviction that the world is always already permeated by God's self-communication, Rahner affirms that every genuine religious experience, Christian or non-Christian, bears the imprint of grace as a "primitive" form of revelation. This conviction arises from his foundational theological insight that creation, from its very beginning, is intrinsically ordered toward a supernatural end: "the world in which we live is in fact supernatural, that is, a world which as a whole is ordered to the personal, Trinitarian God beyond the world. It is ordered as a whole to a supernatural end."<sup>414</sup> Thus, both humanity and the natural world are, from the very beginning, already "shot through" with uncreated grace (God's own self-communication) which leaves behind the traces of, what Rahner calls, a "primitive" or unthematic divine revelation.<sup>415</sup>

Within this framework, Rahner articulates his theology of the "anonymous Christian," proposing that religious experience—even beyond the boundaries of explicit Christian

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413. See Karl Rahner, "Theos im Neuen Testament," in *Sämtliche Werke*, Bd. 4, *Hörer des Wortes: Schriften zur Religionsphilosophie und zur Grundlegung der Theologie*, ed. Albert Raffelt (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1997), 346–403; "THEOS in the New Testament," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 1, *God, Christ, Mary and Grace*, trans. Cornelius Ernst (Baltimore, MD: Helicon Press, 1961), 79–148.

414. Rahner, "THEOS in the New Testament," 79–81.

415. See Rahner, "THEOS in the New Testament," 81.

faith—may embody authentic signs of divine revelation, albeit often in veiled, implicit, or unthematic forms.<sup>416</sup> For Rahner, revelation is not a supernatural intrusion that breaks into the world from the outside, but a re-illumination of the Incomprehensible Mystery which is already and silently present in creation itself.<sup>417</sup> This cosmological perspective allows him to affirm the possibility of authentic encounters with divine grace in non-Christian religions, without necessarily reducing the uniqueness of Christian revelation into a generalized religious sentiment.<sup>418</sup> He states:

We may say that wherever some element or formulation of Christian faith is pointed out to us outside Christianity, even if the two are clearly shown to be connected empirically, there need be no embarrassment or disquiet in accepting such an identification, provided that it is really there and is not achieved by a levelling-down of what is specifically Christian, in the fashion widely current today among historians of religion. All that such a fact would prove is that the living God who revealed himself in Jesus Christ is at work with his light and grace even outside the zone of saving history in the narrower, theological sense.<sup>419</sup>

Non-Christian religions can be genuine sites of authentic encounters with God’s grace. Such encounters must be discerned carefully and without diminishing the radical uniqueness of

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416. See also Rahner, *Foundations*, 126–28.

417. See Rahner, “*THEOS* in the New Testament,” 82.

418. Cf. George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), 32–41. Lindbeck (1923–2018) criticized Karl Rahner’s theology of the “anonymous Christian” as inadequate for fostering genuine interreligious dialogue. While Rahner sought to affirm the universal scope of God’s self-communication, Lindbeck argued that his strong Christocentrism effectively reduces the universality of divine mystery to salvation in Christ. As a result, the religious experiences of non-Christians are interpreted through a Christian horizon rather than being recognized on their own terms. From Lindbeck’s postliberal, cultural-linguistic perspective, Rahner’s model functions as an inclusivist defence of *Christus solus*, one that fails to respect other religious traditions as autonomous frameworks of truth and meaning, thereby impeding the possibility of authentic dialogue. For a detailed treatment of Lindbeck’s critique of Rahner’s “anonymous Christian,” see Gavin D’Costa, *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 15–30. Others, such as Jacques Dupuis (1923–2004), Catherine Cornille (b. 1961), and Paul Knitter (b. 1939), while acknowledging Rahner’s role in opening a theological space for affirming the salvific value of non-Christian religions, also critique his notion of “anonymous Christians” as ultimately patronising. For further discussion, see Jacques Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 220–25; Catherine Cornille, *The Im-Possibility of Interreligious Dialogue* (New York: Crossroad, 2008), 45–47; Paul F. Knitter, *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Toward the World Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985), 63–73.

419. Rahner, “Theos im Neuen Testament,” 348; “*THEOS* in the New Testament,” 81–82.

God's revelation in Christ. Yet, when rightly interpreted, they serve as confirmation that the same God who reveals Godself definitively in Jesus Christ is also mysteriously at work beyond the visible boundaries of Christianity, operating through the Spirit in the depths of human embodiment and historicity.

In this light, Rahner affirms that natural knowledge of God, attained through reason and reflection on human history, constitutes a concrete and authentic form of engagement with the divine.<sup>420</sup> Although distinct from Christian revelation, this rational knowledge is not merely speculative or abstract; it belongs intrinsically to the very structure of human nature. Even the sinner, deprived of sanctifying grace, remains a being who must "reckon with God's speech or silence" in their nature.<sup>421</sup> Consequently, non-Christian religions cannot be dismissed as simply naturalistic or idolatrous. Rather, they reveal a complex dynamic of human openness to God, mediated through the interplay of reason, grace, and the distortions of sin. This tension becomes especially evident in the religious philosophies of antiquity. Greek and Roman traditions, for example, often manifest a genuine metaphysical intuition of the divine, yet they ultimately lapse into polytheism or pantheism due to their inability to preserve the fundamental distinction between creation and the free, personal revelation of God.<sup>422</sup>

Unlike speculative or mythological accounts of the divine, Christianity proclaims that, through the mystery of the Incarnation, the transcendent God has freely entered into human history, spoken personally, and offered humanity a participation in God's Triune life. For Rahner, the Incarnation constitutes the definitive self-revelation of God, disclosing not merely truths about the divine, but God's very self. He writes:

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420. See Rahner, "THEOS in the New Testament," 82–83.

421. See Rahner, "THEOS in the New Testament," 84.

422. See Rahner, "THEOS in the New Testament," 85.

It will alone be able to say unambiguously and definitively just how the personal, transcendent God desires *in actual fact* to stand to the world in his sovereign freedom: namely, as the God who actually discloses his inmost self to man out of grace, so compelling man in a unique, climactic situation to an absolute gravity, either bliss or damnation; as the God who gives his definitive sanction to the world in the Incarnation of his Son and so precisely summons it to share in his triune life.<sup>423</sup>

Christian revelation is not reducible to philosophical speculation, but is the historical event of God's free self-communication to humanity and the world as grace. It purifies and elevates natural religious knowledge, freeing it from distortions and enabling what is genuinely supernatural within it to emerge more fully. Christianity thus reveals how the transcendent God relates to the world, not as an abstract principle but as the living God who has communicated God's inmost being through the Incarnation. According to Rahner, God's free self-communication calls every human person to a decisive and free response, an existential "yes" or "no" to the divine offer of love and grace.<sup>424</sup>

While recognising the genuine though partial presence of grace in non-Christian religions, Rahner insists that only in the Incarnation of Jesus Christ does this hidden self-communication of God reach its definitive and concrete fulfilment. The Incarnation stands at the heart of the Christian understanding of God's relationship to the world. In the Incarnation, God not only affirms the religious longing inscribed in the human person but also fulfils and judges it through a definitive historical self-revelation. The Christian experience of God is thus not merely an unthematic human openness to transcendence, but a concrete and personal encounter with the free God who has entered history in the person of Jesus Christ.<sup>425</sup> While not radically opposed to non-Christian religious experiences, the Christian understanding of

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423. Rahner, "Theos im Neuen Testament," 351–352; "THEOS in the New Testament," 85–86.

424. See also Karl Rahner, "The Unity of Spirit and Matter in the Christian Understanding of Faith," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 6, *Concerning Vatican Council II*, trans. Karl-Heinz and Boniface Kruger (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1966), 174–75.

425. See Rahner, "THEOS in the New Testament," 84.

God remains substantially distinct. Rahner affirms that God's grace can be genuinely encountered wherever there is an authentic human orientation toward the transcendent, even outside the formal boundaries of Christian faith. In such cases, he discerns the quiet, unthematic presence of divine grace in non-Christian religious traditions. Yet he is equally insistent that these experiences, though not devoid of truth, remain partial and susceptible to distortion. Non-Christian religions, Rahner argues, tend to "divinize" the world—substituting creation for the Creator—rather than respond in freedom to the call of a personal living God.<sup>426</sup> In this light, Christianity both completes and purifies natural religious experiences of God by unveiling what had always been silently present within creation: the redeeming self-communication of God. In the historical revelation of Jesus Christ, this self-communication reaches its decisive fulfilment—not as an abstract speculation, but in the material and embodied reality of human history (*Leiblichkeit*).<sup>427</sup>

In Christianity, divine revelation is understood not merely as a free and personal act of God, but also as a gift addressed to a human subject capable of receiving it in freedom. The human person must be open to the possibility of divine revelation within history and language—a *a priori* conditions that presuppose an inner metaphysical nature (*Vorgriff*) oriented toward such revelation. Rahner states:

Man is that being who has to give ear to a possible Revelation in history and in speech; and if he is to experience this personal self-disclosure by God not just as God's free act but also as free grace to him, man, as already constituted in being (and this is the Biblical, Christian conception of Revelation), then he must from the very beginning ('by nature') be that being who has to reckon with God's speech or silence, God's bestowal or refusal of himself.<sup>428</sup>

For revelation to be received not only as a divine initiative but also as a personal response to

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426. See Rahner, "THEOS in the New Testament," 85.

427. See Rahner, "THEOS in the New Testament," 81.

428. Rahner, "Theos im Neuen Testament," 350; "THEOS in the New Testament," 84.

grace, the human being must already be constituted, by nature, as one who stands in relation to the possibility of such revelation. This means that from the outset, the human person, in their finite, embodied, and historical existence in the world, is situated within a horizon in which divine speech or silence must be reckoned with. Revelation, therefore, does not occur in abstraction from human experience, but always within the concrete dimensions of historical human existence (*Leiblichkeit*). It is precisely in this world, in and through language, history, and human bodiliness, that God freely and personally communicates Godself as revelation.

### 6.2.2. Divine Revelation as a Historical Event

Rahner conceives divine revelation not as the product of natural reason, but as a free, historical, and personal event in which God discloses Godself within the concrete bodily conditions of human existence. The experience of God, especially within the Christian tradition, is not primarily speculative or intellectual, but concrete, historical, and personal. At the heart of Rahner's theology of revelation lies the conviction that God reveals Godself not as an abstract principle, but through a free and personal revelation within history.<sup>429</sup>

Revelation, in this sense, is not merely a transmission of divine information to humankind, but the historical encounter between the living God and the human person—an encounter that unfolds within the conditions of temporality, embodiment, and relationality.<sup>430</sup> This understanding marks a decisive shift from any attempt to reduce revelation to a purely rational knowledge about God. While Rahner acknowledges that natural reason can attain a certain awareness of God through reflection on the created world, such knowledge remains

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429. See also Daniel Donovan, "Revelation and Faith," in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Rahner*, edited by Declan Marmion and Mary E. Hines (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 85–86.

430. See also Stephen J. Duffy, "Experience of Grace," in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Rahner*, ed. Declan Marmion and Mary E. Hines (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 44.

limited. It cannot, by its own power, determine the concrete manner in which God freely chooses to enter human history. Rahner writes:

Revelation (by which we mean not just God's speech but also and above all his active dealings with men) does have a real *history*. Precisely because God, who is already known by man's natural reason from the world, is a free person transcending the world, the knowledge which is man's by nature must release this personal God. It cannot work out the concrete manner in which God wishes to enter into relations with man, to deal with him, by calculations starting from below, from man; it cannot, in the last resort, establish a clearly defined, concrete religion.<sup>431</sup>

Revelation, therefore, cannot be constructed from below by autonomous human reasoning. It must be received as a gift—as a free and historical initiative of God's self-giving presence.

Revelation is not simply a body of knowledge or doctrine; it is a relational event in which God personally addresses and engages humanity within the unfolding of history. In this dialogue, human beings are not passive observers but active participants, called to respond in freedom to the divine Word spoken into the concretely embodied dimension of their existence in the world (*Leiblichkeit*).<sup>432</sup> For Rahner, this relational and historical character of divine revelation reaches its definitive climax in the Incarnation, where God's self-communication becomes fully embodied in the person of Jesus Christ.<sup>433</sup>

Rahner articulates the historical character of divine revelation in terms of both divine and human historicity, affirming revelation as God's free self-disclosure within history and as a dialogue addressed to finite, historical subjects. He distinguishes two essential dimensions in the historical character of divine revelation. First, there is the "divine historicity" of revelation, namely, the understanding that revelation is not a timeless or abstract communication, but the personal and free self-disclosure of God within the concrete

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431. Rahner, "Theos im Neuen Testament," 352; "THEOS in the New Testament," 86.

432. See Rahner, "THEOS in the New Testament," 87.

433. See also Rahner, *Foundations*, 117.

conditions of human history.<sup>434</sup> God addresses human beings not through rational intellectual knowledge, but through acts of self-giving love that unfold in specific historical contexts. Revelation is thus a contingent event arising from the sovereign freedom of God, rather than from any intrinsic necessary understanding of God's essence.

Secondly, there is the dimension of the "human historicity" of revelation. Human beings are temporal, historical subjects who live and develop through time-bound processes. For this reason, divine revelation must correspond to the material and finite conditions of human existence; it must take shape within history itself. Rahner writes:

In human historicity: there does in fact exist a real history of Revelation. That is to say, God has certainly not established one and the same thing once and for all, but what he has said and done was said and done at quite definite points in space and time, so that even considered in extension saving history and world history do not coincide.<sup>435</sup>

For Rahner, revelation is addressed to historically situated persons, and thus necessarily unfolds through particular times, places, languages, and events. This unfolding reaches its decisive culmination in the Christ-event which constitutes the definitive moment of God's self-communication in history.<sup>436</sup> Previous moments of revelation, particularly in the Old Testament, are genuinely revelatory but remain partial and preparatory. They bear an intrinsic orientation toward the fullness of revelation in Christ: "The Word of the Old Testament already possesses in actual fact an inner orientation to God's definitive Word in and through Christ."<sup>437</sup> Revelation, therefore, is a real and progressive history, a divine-human dialogue

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434. As Rahner puts it, by "*divine historicity* (if we may be allowed the expression), by which all that is meant is simply that God's decision is personal and free, a moment in a dialogue with men already constituted in being. In so far as God's actually evinced speech to men always meets a human being for whose nature and existence God's Revelation can never become a self-evident constituent, and hence may never be interpreted in accordance with some physical law as a factor in the immanent development of human nature, it is clear that Revelation is always a free event, free even when and indeed in so far as man is presupposed as something given" (Rahner, "*THEOS* in the New Testament," 87).

435. Rahner, "Theos im Neuen Testament," 353; "*THEOS* in the New Testament," 87.

436. See Rahner, "*THEOS* in the New Testament," 88.

437. Rahner, "*THEOS* in the New Testament," 88.

that finds its ultimate fulfilment in the historically embodied person of Jesus of Nazareth.

Rahner advances a central claim that biblical revelation—whether in the form of unthematic anticipation, as in the Old Testament, or as the definitive self-communication of the personal God, as in the New Testament—is always mediated through historicity and human embodiment. Revelation occurs through concrete divine actions in the world that summon a human response. In the Old Testament, the experience of God is inseparable from the historical narrative of Israel. Yahweh is not first encountered as a philosophical “First Cause” or as “being itself,” but as the God who acts: the One who liberates Israel from Egypt, gives the Law, enters into covenant, and leads His people through history.<sup>438</sup> It is through these historical encounters that Israel gradually comes to a deeper awareness of God’s transcendence. For Rahner, this biblical trajectory stands in contrast to classical Greek philosophy, which proceeds from philosophical abstraction toward (if at all) a personal conception of the divine. In Israel’s experience, God is first known as one who acts, and only subsequently understood as the transcendent Lord of creation and history. The historically embodied structure of revelation culminates in the New Testament, where God’s self-communication reaches its fullness in the person of Jesus Christ. Christ is not merely the mediator or bearer of revelation, but revelation itself. In Christ, God does not simply speak about Godself but reveals Godself in person.<sup>439</sup> Accordingly, all prior moments of revelation must be interpreted in light of the Christ-event as their fulfilment and hermeneutical key.

For Rahner, then, concrete human existence in history is both the context and necessary condition for divine revelation. Because the human person is a finite, embodied, and historical subject, any genuine revelation must unfold within the historical structures of embodiment and temporality that constitute human existence. Revelation, therefore, enters

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438. See Rahner, “*THEOS* in the New Testament,” 92–93.

439. See Rahner, “*THEOS* in the New Testament,” 81.

precisely into the fabric of embodied human life. This revelation culminates in the Incarnation, wherein God reveals Godself fully and personally in the concrete, bodily subject of Jesus of Nazareth. Human existence, in its finite, historical, and embodied form (*Leiblichkeit*), is thus the privileged locus in which divine revelation is concretely experienced and received in its fullest and most definitive sense.

### 6.2.3. The Incarnation as the Embodied Expression of Grace

Rahner identifies the Incarnation as the definitive embodiment of divine grace, grounding the New Testament's witness to God not in philosophical rationalism but in the personal self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ. The New Testament understanding of God rests on a decisive theological conviction: God is a free, personal, and loving Being who reveals Godself concretely in history through the Incarnation of Jesus Christ. From the outset, Rahner emphasizes that the New Testament does not attempt to establish the existence of God through rational arguments or doctrinal propositions. Rather, it speaks from a stance of an "unquestioning assurance" (*Selbstverständlichkeit*) of God's presence as a reality already encountered in the world:

The first thing that strikes us when we try to find out how the men of the New Testament thought about God is the *unquestioning assurance* which characterized their consciousness of him. It never occurred to these men to raise the question of his existence as such. The New Testament knew nothing of all those characteristic features of our consciousness of God today. ... For the New Testament God is in the first place simply there. He is there: in spite of all his incomprehensibility and sublimity, all the fear and trembling and the overwhelming joy which this divine Reality may have in store for men, nevertheless as simply the most evident fact of all, the fact in no need of proof or explanation, he is really there.<sup>440</sup>

Rahner underscores that the early Christian consciousness of God is grounded in the immediate experience of God as a personal historical being. God is not posited as a remote

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440. Rahner, "Theos im Neuen Testament," 359; "THEOS in the New Testament," 94.

hypothesis or the conclusion of logical speculation, but as the self-evident and irreducibly personal reality encountered in the person of Jesus Christ. For the New Testament community, God is not merely spoken about but is present and revealed in Christ. As Rahner puts it: “The primary thing for [the early Christians] is not a carefully constructed philosophical conception of God, but God’s own concrete self-disclosure to them in Christ.”<sup>441</sup>

By situating the Incarnation as God’s final and irrevocable self-disclosure in Christ, Rahner highlights its unique status as the unsurpassable expression of divine love in history. The Incarnation is not merely one religious event among others; it is the definitive and unsurpassable act by which God reveals God’s innermost being as a personal self-giving love. For Rahner, the God of Israel—once encountered through covenant, law, and prophetic word—now reveals Godself fully in Jesus Christ, not only as Creator or Judge, but as the God of eternal, irrevocable love.<sup>442</sup> This love is not merely an attribute of God; it is a free and historical relationship, a personal and enduring existential commitment of God to humanity, definitively expressed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. In the Incarnation, God binds Godself to the world in a final and unsurpassable embodied way.<sup>443</sup>

In the Incarnation, God freely embraces human weakness and suffering in the flesh of Christ. God’s love must, therefore, be perceived through the scandal of the Cross and the paradox of divine weakness—the “foolishness and weakness of the Cross.”<sup>444</sup> For Rahner, the clearest manifestation of God’s love is not found in a mysterious display of divine

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441. Rahner, “*THEOS* in the New Testament,” 100.

442. See Rahner, “*THEOS* in the New Testament,” 118–19. He states: “We shall simply start from the usual (and, it would seem, justified) view of this difference, that in the New Testament, and in the strictest sense there alone, God revealed himself as God of Love, as Love itself” (Rahner, “*THEOS* in the New Testament,” 119).

443. Rahner, “*THEOS* in the New Testament,” 122–24.

444. See Rahner, “*THEOS* in the New Testament,” 116.

omnipotence, but in the humility of the Word made flesh: “the eternal creator Logos becomes *sarx* [flesh]—temporal, frail, delivered up to the power of sin and death.”<sup>445</sup> It is from within what appears radically alien to God’s majesty—human weakness, suffering, and abandonment—that God’s love becomes fully visible, for “God is the Free and the Transcendent, whose potentialities could never be exhausted in a finite world, and who in consequence is never really bound by what he has done.”<sup>446</sup> In the Incarnation, Rahner sees the supreme expression of divine freedom and personal commitment: a love that shatters human expectations and transcends all rational definitions of God by becoming historically embodied in the flesh of Christ.

Rahner stresses that because God’s self-communication is an invitation rather than a compulsion, revelation in Christ calls for a free human response of trust, communion, and love. God’s love, precisely because it is utterly free, is never automatic; it calls for faith and invites a personal human response.<sup>447</sup> The God revealed in Christ does not compel but invites; does not coerce but calls. This dialogical freedom, rooted in mutual openness and respect, is what makes the relationship between God and humanity a “New Covenant” grounded in love rather than force.<sup>448</sup> Rahner affirms that the One revealed in Christ seeks not submission but communion, drawing humanity into a participatory relationship of love:

The fact that God in his personal activity takes man into his service, makes him, by a divine historical act, what he already is by nature, the fact that God accepts man as his servant and personally communicates his will to him and has personal dealings with him – all this was already so inconceivable a marvel that it could only be described by using the *image* of paternal or marital love. But that it was already in fact a love which drew men up to God only became evident in the New Covenant.<sup>449</sup>

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445. Rahner, “*THEOS* in the New Testament,” 117.

446. Rahner, “*THEOS* in the New Testament,” 117.

447. See Rahner, “*THEOS* in the New Testament,” 116.

448. See Rahner, “*THEOS* in the New Testament,” 121.

449. Rahner, “Theos im Neuen Testament,” 382; “*THEOS* in the New Testament,” 121.

Rahner emphasizes that God's love, though utterly free, is never coercive. It elicits a personal response grounded in freedom, trust, and faith. In the person of Jesus Christ, God does not impose divine revelation by force but lovingly invites humanity into a relationship of intimate communion. This invitation reaches its highest expression in the New Covenant, wherein God draws human beings into participation in the very life of the Trinity—not merely as obedient subjects, but as beloved partners within a community of divine love. In this covenantal relationship, God's self-communication does not demand human submission; rather it is a call to mutual self-surrender grounded in freedom and love.

Rahner highlights the indispensable role of the Holy Spirit as the personal bond of love who actualizes the Incarnational self-communication of God within the concrete historical conditions of human existence. In this context, the Holy Spirit becomes indispensable for understanding the relationship between the divine and the human. The Spirit is the bond of love through whom the human person is drawn into the inner life of the Triune God, adopted as a child of God and made co-heir with Christ (Rom 8:15; Gal 4:4–6).<sup>450</sup> As Rahner insists, it is the Spirit who makes divine love a living, personal, and interior reality by revealing “the depths of God” and enabling communion with the Father and the Son (1 Cor 2:10–13).<sup>451</sup> The Incarnation, then, is not merely a static event in history but becomes dynamically real for every human person through the indwelling of the Spirit (uncreated grace), who freely enters into human historicity, finitude, embodiment, and freedom, transforming humanity from within. In this way, embodied human existence becomes the concrete locus in which God's indwelling Spirit is received, lived, and made visible in the world.

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450. See Rahner, “*THEOS* in the New Testament,” 124.

451. See Rahner, “*THEOS* in the New Testament,” 124.

### 6.3. Rethinking the Relationship Between Nature and Grace

This section examines Rahner's theology of the relationship between nature and grace. In "Über das Verhältnis von Natur und Gnade" (1950), he advances a decisive critique of extrinsecism and the notion of "pure nature" in Neo-Scholastic thought, proposing instead that grace is constitutive of human existence as a "supernatural existential."<sup>452</sup> The section unfolds in three parts: (1) Rahner's critique of extrinsecism, (2) his engagement with the scholastic idea of pure nature, and (3) his reinterpretation of grace as the transcendental supernatural structure of human openness to God.

#### 6.3.1 Critique of Neo-Scholastic Extrinsecism

Rahner's critique of extrinsecism situates him within the wider twentieth-century debate on nature and grace, where he challenges the reduction of grace to a merely external superstructure imposed upon an otherwise self-sufficient human nature. He engages his critique of extrinsecism fully aware of the theological tension that had developed over the subject in Neo-Scholastic thought within the broader twentieth-century debate shaped by *la nouvelle théologie*, engaging thinkers such as Henri de Lubac (1896–1991), François Bouillard (1912–1981), and Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905–1988).<sup>453</sup> These theologians criticized the dominant Neo-Scholastic framework on grace for its extrinsecism—the idea

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452. See Karl Rahner, "Über das Verhältnis von Natur und Gnade," in *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 5/1, *De Gratia Christi: Schriften zur Gnadenlehre*, ed. Roman A. Siebenrock and Albert Raffelt, with Theodor Schneider (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2015), 66–83; "Concerning the Relationship," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 1, *God, Christ, Mary and Grace*, trans. Cornelius Ernst (Baltimore, MD: Helicon Press, 1961), 297–317.

453. *Nouvelle théologie* ("new theology") refers to a 20th-century movement in Catholic theology—especially prominent in France between the 1930s and 1950s—that sought to renew Catholic thought by returning to the foundational sources of the Christian tradition (*ressourcement*). Instead of relying solely on the doctrinal categories and formulations of Neo-Scholasticism, theologians of this movement turned to Scripture, the Church Fathers, and early medieval theology as living sources of faith. Their goal was to recover a more dynamic, historically grounded, and spiritually rich theology that could engage both the Church and the modern world more effectively. For further discussion, see Alister E. McGrath, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to the History of Christian Thought*, 2nd ed. (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 201.

that grace is something added to human nature from the outside, like a “superstructure” imposed by divine will on a self-contained natural order.<sup>454</sup> According to this view, human nature has no innate or natural capacity for grace. The relationship between nature and grace is one of external compatibility only (described in terms of the *potentia oboedientialis*), where grace may be accepted in principle but is not rooted in human nature itself:<sup>455</sup>

Grace appears there as a mere superstructure, very fine in itself certainly, which is imposed upon nature by God’s free decree, and in such a way that the relationship between the two is no more intense than that of a freedom from contradiction (of a ‘*potentia oboedientialis*’ understood purely negatively); nature does indeed acknowledge the end and means of the supernatural order (glory and grace) as in themselves the highest goods, but it is not clear why it ‘should have much time for’ these highest goods. ... And this is especially the case because in the average (if not unanimous) view grace in itself remains absolutely beyond consciousness.<sup>456</sup>

Rahner critiques this Neo-Scholastic model for presenting the relationship between nature and grace as merely extrinsic and non-essential. Grace appears here as a foreign addition, disconnected from the inner structure of human subjectivity and freedom. It fails to account for the existential significance of grace, offering no compelling reason why the human person should long for it or experience its absence as a profound loss. In this view, grace remains detached from human nature and from the actual conditions of personal existence.

At the core of Rahner’s critique is the assumption, in Neo-Scholastic thought, that human nature is a fixed and clearly intelligible nature, fully knowable apart from grace.<sup>457</sup>

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454. See Rahner, “Concerning the Relationship,” 298.

455. *Potentia oboedientialis* is a theological term—used especially by Thomas Aquinas and Peter of Tarantasia—that refers to the natural openness of the human person to receive God’s grace, a gift that elevates them beyond their natural capacities and draws them into relationship with God. This openness does not imply that grace is something the person deserves or can claim by right. Rather, it signifies that grace is freely given by God and must be freely and consciously accepted if it is to truly shape the person’s life. The concept of *potentia oboedientialis* can only be properly understood within the broader context of the relationship between nature and grace (see Karl Rahner, “Potentia oboedientialis,” in *Sacramentum Mundi: An Encyclopedia of Theology*, vol. 5, *Philosophy to Salvation*, ed. Karl Rahner and Juan Alfaro [New York: Herder and Herder, 1970], 65).

456. Rahner, “Über das Verhältnis,” 67; “Concerning the Relationship,” 298.

457. In “Natur und Gnade” (1957), this relationship between created and uncreated grace is revisited and deepened, especially through a sustained critique of the extrinsicism characteristic of Neo-Scholastic

This presumes that nature can be isolated and analysed as a self-contained order, into which grace may later enter as an optional supplement.<sup>458</sup> Such a framework reduces anthropology to an abstract schema and treats grace as something extrinsic and contingent, rather than as the fulfilment of an existential orientation already inscribed in the natural structure of the human person.

Against this backdrop, Rahner rejects the hypothesis of a “pure nature” by arguing that human existence is always already constituted within the divine economy of grace, such that nature cannot be meaningfully conceived apart from its supernatural orientation toward God.<sup>459</sup> From the very beginning, human nature is always already situated within the divine economy of grace and the history of salvation. Human existence, as it actually unfolds, is never a purely “natural” phenomenon. Any attempt to isolate a hypothetical “pure nature” is not only artificial but existentially meaningless: “How am I to know that everything I in fact

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theology. *Extrinsicism* refers to the view that grace is an external, supernatural addition laid upon a self-contained, autonomous human nature—an approach that renders grace abstract and disconnected from concrete human life. Rahner opposes this by reinterpreting the traditional notion of *potentia oboedientialis*—the “obediential potency” to receive grace—not as a passive, indifferent openness, but as grounded in the very structure of human existence. Drawing from Joseph Maréchal’s transcendental Thomism, which integrates Thomistic metaphysics with Kantian subjectivity, Rahner reclaims St. Thomas’ teaching on the *desiderium naturale visionis beatificae* (natural desire for the beatific vision) as a real orientation within the human person toward the infinite. This desire is a concrete expression of the human spirit’s inner openness to the life of God. Grace, then, is not an alien superstructure imposed from without, but the fulfilment of humanity’s natural and innate capacity for self-transcendence. Grace is present not only in sacramental or explicitly religious contexts, but in human nature itself—even when the individual is unaware of it. In this sense, Rahner affirms the gratuity of grace while insisting that it operates from within the very structures of human subjectivity and freedom. Retrieving the patristic and medieval focus on uncreated grace as the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, Rahner contrasts this with the later scholastic emphasis on created grace as a static state or habit. He also critiques the concept of “pure nature” as a theological abstraction divorced from the actual, historical human condition, arguing instead that human nature is always already graced from the very beginning. For further reading, see Karl Rahner, “Natur und Gnade”, in *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 5/1, *De Gratia Christi: Schriften zur Gnadenlehre*, ed. Roman A. Siebenrock and Albert Raffelt, with Theodor Schneider (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2015), 111–132; “Nature and Grace,” in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 4, *More Recent Writings*, trans. Kevin Smyth (Baltimore, MD: Helicon Press, 1966), 165–88.

458. See Rahner, “Concerning the Relationship,” 298–99.

459. Cf. Henri de Lubac, *Surnaturel: Études historiques*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1991), 435–36. de Lubac, in his seminal critique of the hypothesis of “pure nature,” argued that human nature is always already ordered to the beatific vision, thereby rejecting the extrinsicist dualism of Neo-Scholasticism. Karl Rahner develops this insight by grounding it in the transcendental structures of knowledge and freedom, formulating his theology of the “supernatural existential.” Both de Lubac and Rahner safeguard the gratuity of grace while affirming that it fulfils an intrinsic human orientation toward God.

encounter in my existential experience of myself ... does in fact fall within the realm of my 'nature' ... if there were no vocation to supernatural communion with God?"<sup>460</sup> For Rahner, a supernatural element is always already present within human nature, one that cannot, in actual experience, be bracketed off.<sup>461</sup> Only divine revelation can disclose what belongs properly to the order nature and to the order of grace. Yet even this distinction affirms that grace is not something added to a self-contained nature; it is constitutive of human existence as actually willed by God.<sup>462</sup> Grace, then, is not a foreign intrusion into nature but its fulfilment, its horizon, and its inner orientation.

Rahner maintains that God's invitation to supernatural beatitude must be understood as both absolutely gratuitous and intrinsically inscribed within the structure of human nature, thereby avoiding any conception of grace as a merely external addition to an autonomous nature. God's invitation for the human person to partake in divine life, cannot be reduced to an external or juridical command. It must be interiorly present, always and already inscribed within the structure of human nature.<sup>463</sup> Any conception of grace as merely superimposed upon an otherwise autonomous human nature fails to recognise that grace fulfils a capacity already embedded in human existence from the beginning. At the same time, Rahner remains careful to uphold the gratuity of grace: he insists that grace must remain "absolutely unexacted."<sup>464</sup> If grace were owed to human nature, it would cease to be the free and loving

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460. Rahner, "Concerning the Relationship," 301.

461. Rahner, "Concerning the Relationship," 302.

462. As Rahner puts it, "A *precise* delimitation of nature from grace (supposing it were possible at all) and so a really pure concept of pure nature could thus in every case only be pursued with the help of Revelation, which tells us what in us is grace and so provides us with the means of abstracting this grace from the body of our existential experience of man and thus of acquiring pure nature (in its *totality*) as a 'remainder'" (Rahner, "Concerning the Relationship," 301–02).

463. See Rahner, "Concerning the Relationship," 303.

464. See Rahner, "Concerning the Relationship," 304.

self-communication of God. The ideal, for Rahner, is to preserve both the absolute gratuity of grace and its constitutive presence within human nature—distinguishable in theory, yet inseparable in reality. Grace is not demanded by nature, but freely bestowed upon a nature that is, from the outset, already structured to receive it.

Rahner's critique of Neo-Scholastic extrinsecism culminates in a reinterpretation of the nature–grace relationship in which grace is no longer viewed as an external addition, but as constitutive of what it means to be human. Without denying its gratuitous character, he affirms that the human person is always already oriented toward supernatural communion with God. This orientation is not alien to human nature, but intrinsic to it. Grace does not destroy or override nature; it completes it from within, in accordance with a supernatural finality inscribed in the very structure of the human spirit. In this way, Rahner lays the foundation for a theology of grace in which the concrete, lived experience of the human person becomes the existential horizon within which one discovers oneself, in grace, as always already called and destined for a relationship with God.

### **6.3.2. “Pure Nature” and the Supernatural Finality of the Human Subject**

Rahner situates himself at the crux of the debate between Neo-Scholastic extrinsecism and *la nouvelle théologie*, questioning whether the gratuity of grace can truly be preserved if the human subject is defined from the outset by an intrinsic supernatural finality.<sup>465</sup> His critique of pure nature marks a significant rethinking of certain assumptions regarding the relationship between nature and grace as articulated in Neo-Scholasticism and *la nouvelle théologie*. In the dominant Neo-Scholastic understanding of grace, all aspects of human existence—desires, freedom, limitations, aspirations—were neatly assigned either to the order of “pure nature” or to that of “grace.” In response, key figures of *la nouvelle théologie*,

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465. See also Dych, *Karl Rahner*, 32–33.

especially Henri de Lubac in *Surnaturel* (1946), challenged this bifurcation, insisting that the gratuity of grace renders the very concept of a “pure nature” metaphysically incoherent.<sup>466</sup>

Yet, Rahner presses the debate further by interrogating whether *nouvelle théologie* inadvertently risks falling into a new form of determinism—one in which human nature is so constituted and determined by grace, such that the very notion of “pure nature” collapses, as though human nature were always already grace and could no longer be distinguished from grace—which replicates, from the opposite direction, the very problem it sought to overcome in Neo-Scholasticism.<sup>467</sup> Rahner frames this question sharply:

But is this inner reference of man to grace [*innere Hinordnung des Menschen auf die Gnade*] a constituent of his ‘nature’ in such a way that the latter cannot be conceived without it, i.e. as pure nature, and hence such that the concept of *natura pura* becomes incapable of complete definition? ... The problem is this: is it still possible to conceive of grace as unexacted, supposing that the existential consisting in the inner and unconditional reference to grace and beatific vision were a constituent of man’s ‘nature’ in the sense that man as such could not be thought without it? That grace is absolutely unexacted, that this proposition is the unquestioned point of departure for all further reflexion, this was an indubitable axiom for the ‘new’ teaching too, which it accepted as much as any other theology. The only question then is whether this axiom is objectively consistent with the theorem of an unconditional reference to grace in virtue of nature as such.<sup>468</sup>

Rahner’s central concern here is whether the gratuity of grace can be preserved if human nature is conceived as essentially and unconditionally oriented toward supernatural fulfilment. He questions whether embedding an essential openness to grace within human nature might unintentionally undermine the absolute gratuity of grace. If the human person cannot even be conceived apart from their orientation toward grace, can grace still be considered a truly free gift?

Rahner argues that any attempt to conceive of “pure nature” apart from grace reduces

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466. See Rahner, “Concerning the Relationship,” 300.

467. See also Dych, *Karl Rahner*, 36.

468. Rahner, “Über das Verhältnis,” 71; “Concerning the Relationship,” 303–04.

to a theological abstraction, since in concrete human existence grace is always already inscribed as an ontological constituent aspect of human nature. In this light, he rejects the extrinsicist Neo-Scholastic view, which posits the human orientation to supernatural life in God as a foreign command imposed from outside (*ab extra*) nature.<sup>469</sup> Even if one hesitates to describe this orientation as “natural” in the strict sense, Rahner insists grace must be ontologically registered within the very structure of human existence: “What God decrees for man must be *eo ipso* an interior ontological constituent of his concrete quiddity.”<sup>470</sup> This means that even prior to the reception of created grace, the human person is already inwardly ordered toward supernatural fulfillment in God. If there were any possibility of distinguishing nature from grace in a strict sense, this could only be accomplished by God, who alone can disclose what in the human person properly belongs to their natural constitution and what derives from grace:

A precise delimitation of nature from grace (supposing it were possible at all) and so a really pure concept of pure nature could thus in every case only be pursued with the help of Revelation, which tells us what in us is grace and so provides us with the means of abstracting this grace from the body of our existential experience of man [*vom Gesamtbestand unserer existentiellen Erfahrung vom Menschen*] and thus of acquiring pure nature (in its totality) as a ‘remainder’.<sup>471</sup>

In other words, “pure nature,” if it exists at all, can only be conceived as a theological abstraction—a “remainder concept” (*Restbegriff*) once everything belonging to the order of grace is subtracted. Strictly speaking, only God can identify a “pure” human essence untouched by grace, since every experience of human existence is already marked, from the beginning, by a transcendental graced openness to the divine.

Building on his concern to preserve both the gratuity and the interiority of grace in

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469. See Rahner, “Concerning the Relationship,” 302.

470. Rahner, “Concerning the Relationship,” 302.

471. Rahner, “Über das Verhältnis,” 69–70; “Concerning the Relationship,” 311–12.

nature, Rahner argues that the true theological danger lies not in affirming humanity's openness to supernatural existence in God, but in excluding it under the pretext of safeguarding the gratuity of grace. Humanity's innate orientation toward God does not mean that grace is demanded or deserved by nature. Rather, it shows that grace is the very condition and possibility for humanity's natural openness to God and thus cannot be regarded as wholly foreign to nature.<sup>472</sup> While Rahner takes seriously the caution of *Humani Generis* (1950), which maintains that grace must remain "unexacted," (absolutely gratuitous) he argues that this condition is only compromised if the supernatural is construed as necessary in the same way as the natural.<sup>473</sup> The true danger, then, lies not in affirming that human nature is open to grace, but in excluding this openness in the name of preserving the unexactedness of grace.

Rahner resolves the apparent contradiction between the gratuity of grace and the intrinsic orientation of human nature to the supernatural by relocating the discussion from a hypothetical "pure nature" (*natura pura*) to the concrete, historical subject, who personally encounters God in the world as love. The gratuity of grace is not preserved by separating nature from grace, but by understanding that grace perfects a nature that is always already oriented from the very beginning to supernatural fulfilment in God's love.<sup>474</sup> In this way, Rahner captures a theological structure that preserves both the gratuity of grace and its intrinsic relationship to human nature:

God must so create man that love does not only pour forth free and unexacted, but also so that man as real partner, as one who can accept or reject it, can experience and accept it *as* the unexacted event and wonder not owed to *him*, the real man. ... Man should be able to receive this Love which is God himself; he must have a congeniality for it. He must be *able* to accept it (and hence grace, the beatific vision) as one who has room and scope,

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472. See Rahner, "Concerning the Relationship," 315.

473. See Rahner, "Concerning the Relationship," 303–04.

474. See Rahner, "Concerning the Relationship," 310–11.

understanding and desire for it. Thus he must have a real ‘potency’ for it. He must have it *always*. He is indeed someone always addressed and claimed by this Love. For, as he now in fact is, he is created for it; he is thought and called into being so that Love might bestow itself. To this extent this ‘potency’ is what is inmost and most authentic in him, the centre and root of what he is absolutely.<sup>475</sup>

Grace is never owed to the fact of human existence itself; it is always received as the surprising and personal miracle of God’s love.<sup>476</sup> In this way, Rahner preserves both the absolute gratuity of grace and its intrinsic place within the very constitution of the human person, whose existential reality in the world is always a real potency for encountering God’s love.<sup>477</sup>

### 6.3.3. The “Supernatural Existential” as Transcendental Human Openness

Rahner introduces the concept of the “supernatural existential” (*übernatürliches Existential*) to designate the intrinsic orientation of the human person toward God’s self-communication, thereby overcoming the Neo-Scholastic tendency to treat grace as an extrinsic addition to human nature. The interpretation of the human person as a supernatural existential marks a decisive development beyond the Neo-Scholastic distinction between nature and grace. For Rahner, the goal of human creation is participation in God’s love, as uncreated grace. This human capacity for God’s love is intrinsic to the very structure of what it means to be human:

He (the human person) must have [this love] *always*: for even one of the damned, who has turned away from this Love and made himself incapable of receiving this Love, must still be really able to experience this Love (which being scorned now burns like fire) as that to which he is ordained in the

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475. Rahner, “Über das Verhältnis,” 77; “Concerning the Relationship,” 310–11.

476. In Rahner’s view, God does not create human beings merely as rational animals, but as persons capable of receiving God’s love and of recognising that love precisely as gift. Human nature must therefore be constituted in such a way that the person can receive this love as grace: not as something deserved, nor as something demanded by nature, but as a free and personal invitation. Grace remains wholly unexacted and wholly unexpected. Yet it is not alien to the human subject; it is the fulfilment the most profound mystery of the bond of love between the divine and the human.

477. See also Dych, *Karl Rahner*, 45–46.

ground of his concrete being; he must consequently always remain what he was created as: the burning longing for God himself in the immediacy of his own threefold life. The capacity for the God of self-bestowing personal Love is the central and abiding existential of man [*das zentrale und bleibende Existential des Menschen*] as he really is.<sup>478</sup>

God's self-communication is always directed to the human person as such, not as a mere historical accident, but as a constitutive dimension of their very being, irrespective of their moral condition. This existential structure entails the capacity, orientation, and desire to receive God's love as grace..

The supernatural existential designates the deepest ontological structure of the human person as always already oriented toward God's self-communication. In this context, it refers to the innate orientation of human nature toward God's self-giving love as uncreated grace.<sup>479</sup> This orientation is not a later addition to an otherwise self-contained human nature, but is inscribed within the human person from the beginning of creation, as the deepest ontological structure of their being.<sup>480</sup> Contrary to the separation of nature and grace in Neo-Scholastic thought, Rahner presents this innate orientation as the most fundamental truth of the human person. The human being is created not merely with the capacity to receive grace, but is structurally ordered to receive and respond to God's love, as grace. The concept of the supernatural existential therefore affirms that the human person is always already addressed by God's loving self-communication, and, that grace, while wholly gratuitous, is also constitutive as the most intimate essence—the central “abiding existential”—of human

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478. Rahner, “Über das Verhältnis,” 78; “Concerning the Relationship,” 312–13.

479. See also Rahner, *Foundations*, 141.

480. Weger observes that Rahner's concept of the supernatural existential refers to a permanent, grace-based openness or orientation within the very structure of human existence. Rather than viewing grace as something externally added to human nature—as traditional theology often did by presenting nature and grace as two distinct levels—Rahner understands grace as intrinsic to the human person, shaping our freedom, knowledge, and transcendental capacity from within. In this sense, grace is both “supernatural,” because it stems from God's gratuitous self-communication, and “existential,” because it is a constitutive dimension of human embodiment and subjectivity. For further discussion, see Weger, *Karl Rahner*, 87–94.

nature.<sup>481</sup>

Even those who ultimately reject God's love remain inwardly constituted by this supernatural orientation toward the God of love.<sup>482</sup> Human existence, therefore, is from the outset always already shaped by a permanent inner openness to God's self-giving love. Yet Rahner is equally insistent that this supernatural existential openness must remain unexacted. That is, although human nature is always already structured as a graced capacity, grace itself remains a free and undeserved gift. It is not something owed to human nature, nor can it be claimed as a right: "Man must be able to receive it as free gift, as the ever-astounding wonder, the unexpected, unexacted gift."<sup>483</sup> If the orientation toward grace were simply part of "nature" in the strict theological sense, then grace would no longer be free; it would be required by nature, and thus no longer truly grace (*gratia*).

In so affirming, Rahner rejects any rigid separation between nature and grace, arguing instead that every dimension of human existence is already marked by an inner openness to God, even while grace must remain absolutely free and gratuitous. His conviction that the supernatural exists with and through the natural leads him to define the human person as a "supernatural existential." Every lived human experience of nature: every hope, fear, desire, success, failure, is already touched by grace, or at least by the existential structure that opens the person to grace. For this reason, Rahner insists, it is impossible to draw a "neat horizontal" dividing line between what belongs to the order of nature and what belongs to the order of grace.<sup>484</sup> Still, he preserves the necessity of maintaining a conceptual distinction between nature and grace in order to safeguard the gratuity of grace. He permits the use of

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481. See Rahner, "Concerning the Relationship," 312.

482. Rahner, "Concerning the Relationship," 312.

483. Rahner, "Concerning the Relationship," 313.

484. Rahner, "Concerning the Relationship," 314.

scholastic terms like *potentia oboedientialis*, but only under carefully defined conditions. The human openness to grace must be understood not as passive obediential potency, but as an inner ordination.<sup>485</sup> Even then, it must remain radically contingent, never demanding grace, lest grace cease to be a free gift. Ultimately, Rahner calls for a reformulation of the entire nature–grace relationship in Neo-Scholastic thought, one that does justice to both the radical freedom of God and the innate openness of the natural dimension of human existence to divine life.

Rahner’s concept of the supernatural existential, thus, articulates his view that grace is not something externally added to human nature, but rather already present within it as a permanent, grace-filled orientation toward God’s self-giving love. This grace is termed “supernatural” because it originates in God’s free self-communication, and “existential” because it constitutes a fundamental dimension of concrete human existence in the world, shaping human freedom, knowledge, and transcendental openness from within. In this view, the human person, as a bodily, historical being-in-the-world, is always already marked by the indwelling presence of the Spirit, even when this presence remains unconscious or unthematic. Rahner’s theology of grace thus emphasizes the concrete and historical dimensions of human existence (*Leiblichkeit*) as the medium through which God’s love, in the form of uncreated grace, becomes present and effective in the world.

To sum up, Rahner’s theology of grace relocates the human encounter with God from abstract speculation to the embodied and historical reality of concrete existence. Against Neo-Scholastic extrinsecism, which treated grace as an external superstructure imposed upon an autonomous “pure nature,” Rahner insists that grace is the abiding presence of God’s Spirit within creation itself. By reinterpreting the scholastic distinction between uncreated

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485. Rahner, “Concerning the Relationship,” 315.

and created grace, he reorders their relation: uncreated grace—the indwelling self-communication of the Triune God—is primary, while created grace is its effect, the real transformation of the human subject who receives this divine indwelling. Grace is not the consequence of human sanctification but the condition of its possibility, the free and personal gift that makes holiness possible in the first place.

Rahner's vision grounds a theological anthropology in which human nature is never a neutral substratum awaiting a supernatural elevation *by* grace, but is always already constituted *in* grace. The human person is structurally open to God's indwelling Spirit, existing from the outset within a supernatural horizon. Rahner captures this view with his concept of the "supernatural existential": the constitutive orientation of the human spirit toward God's love. This bodily dimension of human existence is itself a supernatural existential, imbued with God's indwelling Spirit, as uncreated grace, from the very beginning of creation. Thus, grace thus appears not as an external addition but as the inner essence of what it means to be human.

At the same time, Rahner preserves the absolute gratuity of grace. Although human nature is inwardly oriented toward God, grace remains a free and unmerited gift, never reducible to a natural necessity or demand. By holding the absolute gratuity of grace and the supernatural existential together, Rahner transcends both the rigid dualisms of Neo-Scholasticism and the potential determinism of certain strands of *la nouvelle théologie*. Human existence is thereby revealed as the privileged locus where divine love is offered and either freely accepted or rejected in history.

Rahner's theological framework on grace culminates in the Incarnation, the unsurpassable and free expression of God's loving self-communication to humanity and the world. In Jesus of Nazareth, grace assumes an embodied personal nature (*Leiblichkeit*) as its definitive form, revealing not only who God is but what humanity is called to be: the

embodied locus of divine love. The Christ-event shows that God's self-communication does not bypass or destroy finite human existence, but embraces it, making history, matter, and human embodiment the enduring media of revelation and salvation.

## Chapter 7

### **Bodiliness and Christology: The Human Mediation of God's Self-Communication**

Rahner's theology of revelation is fundamentally Christological. It establishes the humanity of Jesus as the definitive and enduring locus of God's self-communication, thereby grounding salvation in the concrete realities of history and human embodiment. Against tendencies to "spiritualize" Jesus' human existence, Rahner insists that the humanity of Jesus is the fullest and most personal expression of the loving gift of Godself to the world. He resists every interpretation of the Incarnation that reduces Jesus' humanity to a mere instrument or passive receptacle of the divine Logos, or that treats the Word-made-flesh as a temporary sign of God's spiritual presence in history. Rather, Rahner situates the humanity of Jesus as the decisive centre and permanent locus where God's love enters into, and remains united with the material dimension of human life. In the flesh of Christ—his body, heart, emotions, relationships, suffering, and death—the divine becomes experientially accessible, historically tangible, and salvifically concrete.

The chapter unfolds in four sections. Section one examines Rahner's defence of Christ's concrete humanity as expressed in devotion to the Sacred Heart, showing how he critiques modern reductions of this devotion to a mere metaphor for divine love and reclaims it as a theological affirmation of the glorified humanity of Jesus. Section two reinterprets classical Christological formulas, particularly the Chalcedonian definition, as signposts rather than final Christological conclusions: formulas that safeguard orthodoxy while requiring continual re-interpretation of the enduring relevance of Christ in light of historical consciousness and lived human experience. Section three turns to Rahner's theology of the Incarnation through the lens of Christmas, where the Word-made-flesh is celebrated not as an

abstract dogma but as the concrete salvific event in which eternity irrevocably enters into time and space. Finally, section four situates Rahner's Christology within an evolutionary horizon, interpreting the Incarnation as the culmination of cosmic self-transcendence, where matter reaches its highest spiritual realization through the bodily Incarnation of the divine Logos.

### 7.1. The Sacred Heart as Concrete Expression of Christ's Human Love

This section examines Rahner's understanding of the Sacred Heart not as a mere symbol of divine love but as a theological affirmation of Christ's concrete humanity, in which the human heart of Jesus remains the abiding locus of God's self-giving love to the world. The discussion will proceed under two themes: (1) metaphorical interpretations of the Sacred Heart and (2) Rahner's critique of these interpretations.

#### 7.1.1. Metaphor to Mediation: The Theology of the Sacred Heart

Moving beyond metaphorical interpretations, Rahner presents the Sacred Heart of Jesus as the permanent centre of Christ's humanity, through which God's love continues to be historically and personally encountered. In "Die ewige Bedeutung der Menschheit Jesu für unser Gottesverhältnis" (1953), he examines the significance of Jesus' human nature within the broader context of devotion to the Sacred Heart.<sup>486</sup> The Sacred Heart, which some often reduce to a mere metaphor for divine love, is more than just a "colourful word" to express God's love for all humanity.<sup>487</sup> It is the heart of Jesus, Rahner asserts—a human heart which

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486. See Karl Rahner, "Die ewige Bedeutung der Menschheit Jesu für unser Gottesverhältnis," in *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 12, *Menschsein und Menschwerdung Gottes: Studien zur Grundlegung der Dogmatik, zur Christologie, Theologischen Anthropologie und Eschatologie*, ed. Herbert Vorgrimler (Freiburg: Verlag Herder, 2005), 251–60; "The Eternal Significance of the Humanity of Jesus for Our Relationship with God," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 3, *The Theology of the Spiritual Life*, trans. Karl-H. and Boniface Kruger (Baltimore, MD: Helicon Press; London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1967), 35–46.

487. See Rahner, "The Eternal Significance," 38–39.

is to be honoured, adored, and loved:

This heart—if it is not turned into just another, more colourful word for God and for the incomprehensibility of his unbounded love—is a human heart [*ein “menschliches” Herz*]. It must not be extolled merely in the actions which at one time flowed from it. It must not be merely the object of a backward-looking adoration which refers to the historical Lord during his life on earth. This heart, which exists now, which no longer belongs to the world around us, which seems to be lost in the far distance of God ... is to be honoured, adored and loved.<sup>488</sup>

The Sacred Heart is not a metaphor but the concrete and enduring reality of Jesus' human love. Though glorified and no longer earthly in the usual sense, it remains a real heart—the abiding centre of Christ's human love through which God continues to communicate God's self to humanity as love. Devotion to the Sacred Heart therefore affirms the humanity of the risen Christ as the permanent symbol of divine love in history.

Rahner situates devotion to the Sacred Heart within the mediatory structure of Christian faith, insisting that Christ's real human heart functions as the concrete centre through which every authentic encounter with God is mediated: “This heart itself, taken both as object and as goal, or better, as mediating centre, as the centre of mediation, through which all our movement must pass if it is really to arrive at God.”<sup>489</sup> The Sacred Heart, then, is not a representative image for God's love for humanity but the concrete point of contact between the transcendent God and the human person. The Christological emphasis behind the devotion to the Sacred Heart is that God's love is not mediated through abstract, metaphorical language but through a human heart, the concrete human heart of Christ that remains eternally valid as a real access point to the experience of God's love.

In emphasising the Sacred Heart as the lasting symbol of Christ's humanity, Rahner—against all tendencies to “spiritualize” the devotion—shows that divine love is

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488. Rahner, “Die ewige Bedeutung,” 254; “The Eternal Significance,” 39.

489. Rahner, “The Eternal Significance,” 46.

encountered not apart from human embodiment but precisely through it. In this manner, his theology of the Sacred Heart safeguards the concreteness of the Incarnation against any tendency to spiritualize or make abstract the love of Christ. Thus, the Sacred Heart is not merely a poetic image removed from the historical reality of Jesus, but the enduring, embodied form of God's self-giving love—a concrete human love that remains the mediating centre through which every authentic encounter with God's love must pass. In this sense, the devotion functions as a theological symbol of *Leiblichkeit*, affirming that divine love is not mediated in spite of human bodiliness, but precisely because of it. The glorified human heart of Christ thus stands as the permanent and living expression of God's irrevocable covenantal love for the world.

### 7.1.2. Critique of Modern Reductions of Devotion to the Sacred Heart

By grounding devotion to the Sacred Heart in Christ's concrete love, Rahner critiques modern pietistic tendencies that reduce it to a vague monotheistic devotion thereby erasing its concrete grounding in the real humanity of Christ. He observes that many contemporary believers struggle to relate meaningfully to created realities—such as the saints, angels, Mary, and even Christ's human nature—viewing them merely as metaphoric labels or different synonyms for expressing the various ways in which the one reality of grace is mediated.<sup>490</sup> In the context of devotion to the Sacred Heart, such reductionism can be found in tendencies to view the word “heart” as synonymous with Christ or God, and so on. He states:

All one needs do is to merely listen more closely some time to certain formulations occurring in the case of such a well-meaning and well-intentioned Sacred Heart devotion which, however, is actually a monotheistic adoration of God simply labelled with these words . . . . One could in such formulations simply replace the word ‘heart’ by ‘Christ’, and ‘Christ’ again by ‘God’, without anything being changed in the meaning or the essential

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490. See Rahner, “The Eternal Significance,” 38–39.

intentionality of the prayer—a sign, that what is said is not realized in a seriously religious way.<sup>491</sup>

Reducing devotion to the Sacred Heart to just another form of the many already existing monotheistic adorations obscures the concrete significance of the uniqueness of the heart of Christ—his concrete humanity—for Christian worship and adoration. Many believers have come to use terms like “heart,” “Christ,” and “God” interchangeably, which reflects a subtle but profound loss: the erosion of a real, personal, human relation with the subject of adoration. True devotion to the Sacred Heart must involve personal love for the real, historical, and glorified humanity of Christ, a love that passes through the human heart of Jesus as the centre of the relationship between God and the human person.

Rahner argues that the inability to fully appreciate created realities as they are—particularly within the context of religious devotions—is, at least in part, caused by a mistaken and fundamentally unchristian view of God: one that leans toward pantheism, the belief that God is identical with the universe and that everything is God. For him, this pantheistic approach erases the distinction between Creator and creation, such that the true God becomes a being who must dominate other realities in order to exist. On the contrary, God is not the “only reality” or the “truly real” who drains or absorbs the reality of all other beings like a vampire:

Our existential insensitivity and the weakness of our power of realization regarding non divine realities which fall, or ought to fall, into the sphere of religious acts, is at least partially due to a false, basically unchristian, pantheistic or theophanistic conception of God. The true God is not the one who kills so that he himself can live. He is not ‘the truly real’ which like a vampire draws to himself and so to speak sucks out the proper reality of things different from himself; he is not the *esse omnium*.<sup>492</sup>

In this view, the primary reason for the diminished—or even complete lack of—appreciation

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491. Rahner, “Die ewige Bedeutung,” 254; “The Eternal Significance,” 39.

492. Rahner, “Die ewige Bedeutung,” 255; “The Eternal Significance,” 40.

for created realities in contemporary religious devotion is a distorted, pantheistic conception of God that obscures the fundamental distinction between Creator and creation. This view treats God as if, God were the only reality, absorbing or negating all other beings, as though creation must vanish in order for God to be fully present. In contrast, the true Christian God does not eliminate creation but lovingly sustains and elevates it. This is especially true of Christ's humanity and his Sacred Heart. Authentic Christian devotion to the Sacred Heart must therefore recognise and love the Sacred Heart as a truly human heart, the heart that belongs to the humanity of Jesus, which is at the same time the real symbol of his permanent and irreplaceable presence, through which God continues to encounter and transform the world in love.

Theological reflections on the Sacred Heart must call for a renewed appreciation of the humanity of Jesus as the indispensable medium through which God's love enters and meets the human person in the world. This glorified heart, Rahner argues, is not simply a vestige of Jesus' past actions of love but the permanent centre of mediation through which every authentic encounter with God takes place.<sup>493</sup> The Sacred Heart remains, even in its glorified state, a real heart (personal, historical, and relational) through which God's love continues to be communicated in a fully human way.<sup>494</sup>

For Rahner, the erosion of meaningful devotion to created realities, including Christ's humanity, stems from an unchristian view of God that negates human creatureliness. In contrast, authentic Christian worship (*latria*)—which has God for its only goal—must affirm

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493. See Rahner, "The Eternal Significance," 44.

494. As Rahner puts it, "This 'Heart' really means the human heart. This is what is really meant by it, to this our acts are really related, and it is really present 'for us' and not merely in itself. It is this heart in its finiteness, in the definable clarity of its love by which it is distinguished—though inseparably—from the mystery of divine love, which in itself can harbour in the abyss of its origin both grace and judgement, mercy and anger, and which becomes clearly love for us only once (and because) it has incarnated itself in the heart of Jesus, in the flesh of our flesh and in the finiteness of our existence. This is the heart which is meant: this heart itself, taken both as object and as goal, or better, as mediating centre, as the centre of mediation, through which all our movement must pass if it is really to arrive at God" (Rahner, "The Eternal Significance," 46).

that God's presence does not destroy creation but upholds it, and that Christ's Sacred Heart, as the real symbol and reality of God's human love, remains the privileged point of access to God's self-communication in the world as grace.<sup>495</sup> Devotion to the Sacred Heart, then, is a profound theological affirmation of the concrete, historical, and bodily humanity (*Leiblichkeit*) of Christ as the abiding gateway or mediating centre for encountering God's love concretely in the world.

## 7.2. Christology and the Doctrine of Christ's Nature

This section addresses Rahner's Christology by examining his interpretation of classical dogmatic formulas in relation to the humanity and divinity of Christ. In "Probleme der Christologie von heute" (1954), while Rahner affirms the necessity of precise Christological dogmas, he cautions against their absolutization, insisting that such formulas must remain provisional openings, and not conclusive statements, into the mystery of God's historical self-communication.<sup>496</sup> Christ, as both fully divine and fully human, must be understood in light of his concrete, historical existence and the redemptive significance of his flesh (*sarx*). The following themes shall be explored: (1) Jesus in Christological formulas and (2) the humanity of Jesus.

### 7.2.1. Christ's Nature in Christological Formulas

Rahner contends that Christological dogmas are indispensable for safeguarding Christian orthodoxy, yet he insists they remain limited formulas that can never exhaust the

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495. See Rahner, "The Eternal Significance," 45–46.

496. See Karl Rahner, "Probleme der Christologie von heute," in *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 12, *Menschsein und Menschwerdung Gottes: Studien zur Grundlegung der Dogmatik, zur Christologie, Theologischen Anthropologie und Eschatologie*, ed. Herbert Vorgrimler (Freiburg: Verlag Herder, 2005), 261–301; "Current Problems in Christology," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 1, *God, Christ, Mary and Grace*, trans. Cornelius Ernst (Baltimore, MD: Helicon Press; London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1961), 149–200.

mystery of Christ's divine and human natures.<sup>497</sup> Dogmatic Christological formulas should be understood as starting points, provisional expressions that open the way for deeper theological reflection on the inexhaustible mystery of God revealed in Christ: "The clearest formulations, the most sanctified formulas ... derive their life from the fact that they are not end but beginning, not goal but means, truths which open the way to the—ever greater—Truth."<sup>498</sup> Thus, dogmatic formulas, in Rahner's view, must be continually reinterpreted in light of new historical and existential contexts.<sup>499</sup>

Rahner critically examines the nature and function of dogmatic Christological statements, with particular attention to the Chalcedonian formula, as they relate to Christ's nature. Central to his argument is the tension between the certitude, almost of a "scientific" conviction, with which these dogmatic Christologies are sometimes articulated, and the inherent incomprehensibility of God's nature itself.<sup>500</sup> Accordingly, dogmatic statements, while necessary, should not be regarded as absolutely conclusive pronouncements about God, but rather as springboards for deeper theological reflection on God's incomprehensibility.<sup>501</sup>

Rahner writes:

Once theologians and the ordinary magisterium of the Church have begun to pay attention to a reality and a truth revealed by God, the final result is always a precisely formulated statement. ... Yet while this formula is an end, an acquisition and a victory, which allows us to enjoy clarity and security as well as ease in instruction, if this victory is to be a true one the end must also be a

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497. See Rahner, "Current Problems in Christology," 149–50.

498. Rahner, "Current Problems in Christology," 149.

499. See Rahner, "Current Problems in Christology," 150. See also *Foundations*, 227.

500. See Rahner, "Current Problems in Christology," 151–52.

501. See Rahner, "Current Problems in Theology," 151–52. Cf. Paul Ricoeur, "Response to Karl Rahner's Lecture: On the Incomprehensibility of God," *Journal of Religion* 58, Supplement: Celebrating the Medieval Heritage: A Colloquy on the Thought of Aquinas and Bonaventure (1978): S126–S131, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41575985>. In his response to Rahner's lecture on the incomprehensibility of God, Ricoeur (1913–2005) affirms Rahner's hermeneutical project yet reframes it through the philosophy of language. He argues, for example, that Rahner's use of theological terms, such as God's incomprehensibility, can be illuminated by the creative function of language in science and poetry, where metaphors and models, far from delivering absolute statements, destabilize ordinary speech and open new horizons of meaning.

beginning. It follows ... that any individual truth, above all one of God's truths, is beginning and emergence, not conclusion and end.<sup>502</sup>

While Rahner affirms the necessity of precise dogmatic statements for safeguarding against error and offering clarity in matters of faith and practice, he cautions against treating these formulations as complete or definitive expressions of divine truth. Rather, they should be understood as starting points—provisional expressions that open the way for deeper theological reflection God, the Incomprehensible Mystery.

Rahner moves on to examining the nature of Christ as articulated in dogmatic formulas, showing that Jesus' humanity is not the negation of his divinity but its fullest realization in obedient openness to God. Turning specifically to the Chalcedonian declaration on the hypostatic union (*unio hypostatica*)—that Christ is “one Person in two natures”—he highlights the inherent difficulty in fully grasping this formula.<sup>503</sup> He argues that any Christology that takes the historicity of Jesus seriously must also affirm his humanity not merely as an instrument used by the Logos, but as the concrete medium of divine revelation itself.<sup>504</sup> To this end, he cautions against a subtle Monothelite tendency to reduce Christ's human nature to a passive instrument for divine action. For Christ to be truly human, his humanity must possess genuine freedom and spiritual autonomy—an autonomy that does not stand in opposition to, but rather fully affirms, his divine nature.<sup>505</sup> The humanity of Jesus is such that it does not exclude but rather enables the confession of his divinity, which is the self-presence of his humanity in the light of the beatific vision.<sup>506</sup> In other words, Jesus'

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502. Rahner, “Probleme der Christologie von heute,” 261; “Current Problems in Christology,” 149.

503. For further discussion on the hypostatic union, see Rahner, *Foundations*, 195–97.

504. See Rahner, “Current Problems in Christology,” 156–57.

505. See Rahner, “Current Problems in Christology,” 157–58.

506. See also Karl Rahner and Wilhelm Thüsing, *A New Christology*, trans. David Smith and Verdant Green (New York: Seabury Press; London: Search Press, 1980), 146.

divinity is not a reality alongside or above his humanity, but the fullest and most luminous realization of that humanity as it stands open to and transparent before God in beatific glory:

The struggle against Monothelitism after the rejection of Monophysitism shows, that the ‘human nature’ of the Logos possesses a genuine, spontaneous, free, spiritual, active centre, a human self-consciousness, which as creaturely faces the eternal Word in a genuinely human attitude of adoration, obedience, a most radical sense of creaturehood. Indeed it is emphatically maintained that this sphere of consciousness ... depends on the *visio beatifica* of this human consciousness, and cannot be a datum of Jesus’ *human* self-consciousness—if by self-consciousness is understood the simple being-present-to-itself of an independent entity.<sup>507</sup>

Christ’s humanity must include real freedom, spiritual autonomy, and a genuinely human self-consciousness that stands in obedient relationship to God. This means Jesus, as truly human, must be capable of spiritual growth, moral decision, and authentic response to God, his humanity not simply functioning as a passive instrument for the divine Logos. Christ’s divinity, then, is not a negation of his bodily humanity (*Leiblichkeit* of Christ), but its highest fulfilment, made fully intelligible in the light of the *visio beatifica*. Preserving Christ’s humanity safeguards his role as a human Saviour who lives and acts within the concrete dimension of human history while being fully united with God as the divine Logos.

### **7.2.2. The Humanity of Jesus and the Risk of Theological Reductionism**

Rahner critiques some classical textbook Christologies for reducing the humanity of Jesus to a mere instrument of redemption, thereby neglecting the intrinsic salvific significance of Jesus’ concrete human experiences and actions.<sup>508</sup> Within such reductive approaches, the emphasis falls almost exclusively on Christ’s redemptive role as Saviour of the world, with salvation commonly interpreted in a juridical or moral sense as the general

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507. Rahner, “Current Problems in Christology,” 158.

508. As Dych emphasizes, the humanity of Jesus is not “merely the livery which God donned in order to appear among us” (See Dych, *Karl Rahner*, 68).

forgiveness of sins.<sup>509</sup> This approach, however, often overlooks the redemptive value of the particular events of Jesus' life—his circumcision, presentation in the Temple, prayer, transfiguration, abandonment, and death on the cross—all of which are integral expressions of his radical embodiment. For Rahner, this oversight reflects the problematic assumption that “Christ’s humanity only has ‘interest’ insofar as it is dignified by being adopted by Christ’s person, and thus precisely not in itself.”<sup>510</sup>

Grounding redemption in the particularity of Jesus’ human actions and sufferings, Rahner holds that the humanity of Christ is not incidental to salvation but the very channel through which God’s redemptive love is made effective. He argues that it is important to consider the inner content or the nature of Christ’s redemption itself, not just in a generic form but also in its particulars—that is, “the Cross, death, obedience (his actions), abandonment by God, death due to the action of sinners themselves.”<sup>511</sup> According to Rahner, when Scripture says, “We have been redeemed by Christ’s death”—with everything that death specifically involves—and “by his obedience,” which was concretely expressed and fully accomplished in his death, it should be taken as the defining feature of Christ’s redemption.<sup>512</sup> Unless there is strong reason to think otherwise, other aspects not directly connected to what actually causes redemption, such as the forgiveness of sins, remain secondary or irrelevant, despite what is often suggested by the traditional satisfaction theory.<sup>513</sup> In this sense, the humanity of Christ, in all its historical, embodied, and existential

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509. See Rahner, “Current Problems in Christology,” 190.

510. Rahner, “Current Problems in Christology,” 190–91.

511. See Rahner, “Current Problems in Christology,” 193.

512. See Rahner, “Current Problems in Christology,” 193. See also Rahner and Thüsing, *A New Christology*, 148–49.

513. See Rahner, “Current Problems in Christology,” 193.

implications, is the very means by which redemption becomes possible as a divine act. As Rahner puts it, Jesus' humanity "is first and last the life of God."<sup>514</sup>

Rahner deepens his Christology by interpreting *sarx* ("flesh") not merely as the physical constitution of humanity but as the historical and existential condition of weakness, finitude, and sinfulness into which the Logos enters in order to accomplish redemption. In ordinary usage, *sarx* is often understood as the physical body of a person, that is, their necessary and permanent condition as bodily beings in the world. The humanity of Christ opens up a richer perspective toward a theological understanding of *sarx*. For Rahner, *sarx* denotes not only the physical human body but the historical condition of weakness, finitude, and exposure to sin into which the Logos enters. Redemption must occur in this concrete sphere of vulnerability, since it is precisely here that guilt becomes tangible. The Logos assumes the "flesh of sin," not to share sin itself, but to redeem humanity from within its fragile, sinful condition:

What we involuntarily think of when we speak of Christ's humanity and his human nature is nearly always just that element in the meaning of *sarx* which belongs to the necessary and permanent constitution of the entities so characterized. But *sarx* is intended to characterize man or his bodiliness precisely [*seine Leiblichkeit bezeichnen*] in so far as this possesses a quite definite character arising out of an historical development within a history of salvation and damnation. Flesh is the weak, the corruptible, consecrated to death, the dimension within which sin becomes manifest and tangible. ... The Logos assumed the 'flesh of sin'. ... We should then see more clearly that Christ had not only to be 'like us in nature' so as to be our Redeemer, but with us had to spring 'from one' (Heb 2:11), our brother according to the flesh. For he could only possess this flesh, which was to be redeemed and in which we were to be redeemed, if he who was 'born of woman' shared our origin as well as our nature.<sup>515</sup>

*Sarx* is not just incidental but essential to understanding redemption. It is precisely in this fragile and sinful condition of human existence that guilt becomes tangible, and therefore, it

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514. See Rahner, "Current Problems in Christology," 192.

515. Rahner, "Probleme der Christologie von heute," 297–98; "Current Problems," 196–97.

is also the place where redemption must occur. The Logos had to assume this exact concrete and historical dimension of humanity (*Leiblichkeit*), not just to share our nature, but to redeem it from within. Only by truly sharing in our *sarx*—our history, origin, and bodily condition—could Christ overcome the flesh of sin and make God’s life accessible to all human creation.<sup>516</sup>

### 7.3. The Incarnation in the Light of Christmas

This section turns to Rahner’s theological interpretation of Christmas as the celebration of the concrete historical manifestation of the Incarnation, in which God’s self-communication enters into the vulnerability of human flesh as the decisive and irrevocable revelation of divine love. In “Zur Theologie der Weihnachtsfeier” (1955), he holds that in the mystery of Christmas, Jesus’ humanity is not treated as a mere symbol or instrument, but as the very reality through which God makes Godself present in the world.<sup>517</sup> Here, the Infinite embraces

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516. In “Christologie heute?” (1975), Rahner expands on the themes discussed in earlier Christological reflections by affirming both the importance of classical Christological formulations and the urgent need for their renewal through a deeper emphasis on Jesus’ concrete humanity and historical existence, especially in the modern world. He insists that while contemporary Christologies cannot simply dismiss traditional dogmatic formulas—particularly those of Chalcedon—since they continue to offer the essential framework through which the Church has historically recognized Jesus as Lord and Mediator, they must also acknowledge the limitations of these formulations. Classical Christology, he argues, too often presents Christ as a semi-divine figure, thereby undermining the radical reality of Jesus’ finite, human experience. For Rahner, a renewed Christology must be rooted not in speculative analysis of the two natures of Christ, but in his historical life, death, and resurrection—a life lived in love, service, suffering, and death, through which God communicates definitively and irrevocably with humanity. It is precisely in Jesus’ historical suffering and “God-forsakenness” that God’s absolute self-communication as love becomes most fully visible, offering the ultimate expression of divine solidarity with human beings and the deepest answer to the mystery of redemption. This emphasis on historicity does not aim to replace classical Christological dogmas; rather, it serves to enrich and clarify them by grounding them in existential reality. In doing so, Rahner moves toward an interpretation of the hypostatic union that speaks meaningfully to the modern Christian, one that affirms the radical nearness of God in the concrete conditions of human life. In this way, Christology becomes inseparable from anthropology. To accept one’s own humanity—*Leiblichkeit*—is, in Rahner’s view, to accept Christ, because Christ is God’s definitive affirmation of what it means to be truly human. Through the Incarnation, God embraces the full depth of human existence, revealing that the finite, embodied, historical person is the very locus of divine self-revelation and redeeming grace. For further discussion, see Karl Rahner, “Christologie heute?,” in *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 22/1b, *Dogmatik nach dem Konzil: Zur Grundlegung der Theologie, der Gotteslehre und Christologie*, ed. Michael Hauser and Peter Walther (Freiburg: Verlag Herder, 2013), 925–37; “Christology Today?,” in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 17, *Jesus, Man and the Church*, trans. Margaret Kohl (New York: Crossroad; London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1981), 24–38.

517. Karl Rahner, “Zur Theologie der Weihnachtsfeier,” in *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 14, *Christliches Leben: Aufsätze – Betrachtungen – Predigten*, ed. Herbert Vorgrimler (Freiburg: Verlag Herder, 2006), 97–105; “Thoughts on the Theology of Christmas,” in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 3, *The Theology of the Spiritual*

the finite—bodily, historically, and spiritually—so that human existence becomes the privileged locus of divine self-disclosure. The discussion will unfold around two central themes: (1) the Incarnation in the light of the Christmas mystery and (2) Christ’s humanity at the heart of the Christmas event.

### 7.3.1. The Mystery of the Incarnation as Celebrated in Christmas

Beyond the gifts, decorations, and even the habitual prayers of the season, Rahner challenges believers to rediscover Christmas as the living event in which God enters history in the vulnerability of flesh. He begins by asking what it truly means to celebrate Christmas and how it should be celebrated, cautioning that Christmas cannot be reduced either to seasonal customs or to routine religiosity. Festive practices such as gifts and decorations, though meaningful, risk becoming distractions; even prayer and liturgy, if detached from genuine awareness of the mystery, may fall short:

What is clear is that we do not really celebrate Christmas by giving presents, by putting up a Christmas tree, by making our home as cosy as possible or by other touching customs carried on in a mildly sceptical frame of mind. But what more is there? If, as Christians, we simply ‘think’ about the *doctrine* of the Incarnation of the eternal Word (even with good will and a desire to believe), then it is obviously not yet a Christian Christmas for us. Yet what more are we to do? Pray and attend Midnight Mass? But why should this make Christmas a properly celebrated Christmas when, after all, this ‘celebration’ takes place—at least, it is to be hoped—even at other times, daily or every Sunday?<sup>518</sup>

For Rahner, both the sentimental customs and the routine religiosity that often accompany Christmas need further reflection. Traditions such as gift-giving and decoration, while not wrong in themselves, can easily become distractions from the depth of the mystery they are meant to express. Even spiritual practices like prayer or Mass, if done without a fresh

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*Life*, trans. Karl-H. and Boniface Kruger (Baltimore, MD: Helicon Press; London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1967), 24–34.

518. Rahner, “Zur Theologie der Weihnachtsfeier,” 97; “Thoughts on the Theology of Christmas,” 24.

awareness of what Christmas actually means, may fall short of what the celebration of Christmas truly entails. For Rahner, a genuine celebration of Christmas must go beyond both cultural habits and pious religious repetitions.

Dismissing both sentimental and routine religiosity, Rahner turns to “silence” as the only posture capable of appreciating Christmas as the breakthrough of God into humanity’s emptiness. While acknowledging that it is impossible to offer an exact formula for how Christmas should be celebrated, Rahner offers silence as an essential disposition for entering into the mystery of Christmas.<sup>519</sup> Silence, for Rahner, is a spiritual listening into the emptiness of the heart and the emptiness that pervades the entire world—human sinfulness, suffering, vulnerability, the fear of death, and so on—which leads one into a profound reflection on what the case would be had God not broken this silence and entered the world to meet humanity in that obscure, empty space.<sup>520</sup>

In Rahner’s view, the message of Christmas does not truly resound in the powerful words falling from our pulpits unless it emerges from this prior mystical experience rooted in silence, emptiness, and our own vulnerability. Only in this silence does one begin to perceive the meaning of Christmas: that God is near; that God, in God’s infinite freedom and incomprehensibility, has come to dwell with His vulnerable creatures and is now one with them in the flesh, closer than anyone could ever imagine. Rahner writes:

God is really close to you—there where you are—when you have really found your way (and not just in concepts) into the openness to infinity possessed by the real man. Once this has happened, God’s descent into the flesh will explain to you the secret, blessed meaning of the transcendence of his Spirit that is to be found in the event of Christmas. God’s remoteness is the incomprehensibility of his all-pervading nearness, says the message of Christmas. He is tenderly present. He is near. He touches your heart softly with his love. He says: fear not. He is imprisoned within. ... This is how you must interpret your interior experience; you must experience it in this way as the most solemn feast and celebration of the divine descent of eternity into

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519. See Rahner, “Thoughts on the Theology of Christmas,” 25.

520. See Rahner, “Thoughts on the Theology of Christmas,” 26–27.

time—of the infinite into the finite—and of God’s marriage with his creature. This feast takes place within you, even within your very self (theologians dryly call it ‘grace’).<sup>521</sup>

The true meaning of Christmas is not fully discovered by how much one understands or explains the doctrine of the Incarnation, especially from the pulpit. Rather, it is through a personal, interior experience marked by silence and openness to mystery. It is in this state of experiencing our own reality of human sinfulness and vulnerability that one begins to perceive that God is not distant, but astonishingly near—dwelling in human flesh (*Leiblichkeit*) and in the depths of the human heart. The mystery of Christmas reveals that God’s very transcendence is expressed as intimate nearness: a gentle presence that consoles, reassures, and lovingly dwells within, in solidarity with human creatureliness as “uncreated grace.”<sup>522</sup>

### 7.3.2. The Humanity of Jesus as the Revelation of God’s Own Being

Building on his emphasis on silence as the entryway into the Christmas mystery, Rahner deepens his reflection by showing that in the humanity of Jesus, one encounters God, whose eternal love has taken on the vulnerability of human flesh. The true celebration of Christmas hinges on the recognition of the humanity of God as revealed in the Incarnation. God’s assumption of human nature is the very reality through which God expresses and reveals Godself to the world. In the birth of Jesus, God does not merely appear as human—God became human, and this humanity is God’s own nature.<sup>523</sup> Thus, to encounter the

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521. Rahner, “Thoughts on the Theology of Christmas,” 28–29.

522. Although Rahner prioritises Christmas as an experience of the heart, he does not entirely dismiss the necessity of conceptual understanding. He writes, “The experience of the heart (in spirit and in grace, and not by one’s own power!) gives us the really true understanding of the Christmas message of faith. Yet for this you must first of all take some trouble to understand the message of Christmas even in a conceptual way before you try to understand it better in the silent experience of your heart” (Rahner, “Thoughts on the Theology of Christmas,” 29).

523. See Rahner, “Thoughts on the Theology of Christmas,” 29–30.

humanity of Jesus is to encounter Godself. Christmas, then, marks the moment when eternity enters time, when infinite love assumes finite flesh, and when the divine chooses to dwell in the vulnerability of historicity and human embodiment.

Rahner holds that the Christmas confession “the Word became flesh,” must be understood in its full ontological depth, not merely as a metaphor or external disguise, but as the affirmation that God’s very being is now expressed and revealed through concrete humanity. The mystery of the Incarnation reveals both who God is and what it means to be human “in the flesh.”<sup>524</sup> God’s absolute self-giving and total identity with creation is the ultimate mystery we celebrate at Christmas. In Rahner’s view, the incarnate humanity (*Leiblichkeit*) of God becomes a central category for Christological discourse. The central message of Christmas is that God has become human.<sup>525</sup> Rahner insists that this message must not be misunderstood in a Monophysite or Nestorian sense, as if “God” were merely the subject and “human” the predicate, implying that the humanity of God is merely a disguise, and that even in becoming human, God remains fundamentally unchanged. On the contrary, when we say that “God became human,” it means that humanity is the very reality that God has assumed.<sup>526</sup> God expresses and manifests Godself to the world through, and as, a human person. He states:

God is man [*Gott ist Mensch*]: this does *not* mean that he has ceased to be God in the unconfined fullness of his divine majesty. God is man: this does *not* mean that the ‘human’ in him is something which does not really concern him at all, something which is externally manipulated by him as a mere tool. ... God is man, this really tells us something about God himself. Because ... human nature is thus his very own reality in which *he himself* and not merely a human nature different from him comes out to meet us, so that, when one grasps this humanity, one has in very truth understood and grasped something of God himself. ... When God manifests his humanity, then (since it is not something abstract) it always meets us in such a way that *he himself* is there,

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524. See Rahner, “Thoughts on the Theology of Christmas,” 33.

525. See Rahner, “Thoughts on the Theology of Christmas,” 28.

526. For further discussion on God’s “becoming,” see Rahner, *Foundations*, 219–23.

since this full and genuine humanity always is itself precisely *because* it is *his* and *because* it is *human* in absolute purity and perfection and is precisely *his*.<sup>527</sup>

Rahner emphasizes that to say “God is man” is not to speak metaphorically or merely about appearances. Rather, it is to affirm that God’s very being is now expressed through real, concrete human nature. This humanity is not an external mask or face-covering that God puts on, but God’s own reality—God’s self-revelation in human form.<sup>528</sup> To encounter Christ, in his humanity, is to encounter what God has truly become, because human nature is now truly God’s nature. Humanity is the very means in which God chooses to reveal and make Godself known to the world. God’s human nature is historically affirmed in the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, the Incarnation of the Eternal Word whom we celebrate at Christmas.<sup>529</sup> Thus, the Incarnation gives a fresh perspective on what it means to be human. According to Rahner, humanity “is pure reference to God”—that is, we can only talk about God sensibly with reference to humanity, and vice versa, since humanity is the reality that God has become.<sup>530</sup>

In reflecting on the mystery of Christmas, Rahner warns against conceiving the Incarnation as though humanity were already fully in place and God simply stepped into it afterward—an assumption that obscures the radical depth of God’s self-communication in

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527. Rahner, “Zur Theologie der Weihnachtsfeier,” 101; “Thoughts on the Theology,” 29–30.

528. See also Roman A. Siebenrock, “Christology,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Rahner*, ed. Declan Marmion and Mary E. Hines (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 118.

529. See Rahner, “Thoughts on the Theology of Christmas,” 30. In this light, Rahner contends that any substantial anthropological discourse is necessarily theological at its core, particularly Christological, since the human person is a mystery that refers beyond itself to the mystery of God in Christ (see Rahner, “Thoughts on the Theology of Christmas,” 31). Human existence, in its depth and freedom, cannot be fully understood apart from the event of God’s self-communication in Christ. As such, Christology becomes the decisive horizon within which anthropology must be interpreted. Rahner asserts that “Christology may be studied as self-transcending anthropology, and anthropology as deficient Christology,” expressing his conviction that the question of what it means to be human finds its definitive answer only in the revelation of God in Christ, and conversely, that every authentic understanding of Christ must simultaneously reference the concrete dimension of human experience in the world (*Leiblichkeit*) in its openness to divine grace (see Rahner, “Current Problems in Christology,” 163–64).

530. See Rahner, “Thoughts on the Theology of Christmas,” 31–32.

becoming flesh. Having established that the Incarnation is the human face of God, and that humanity is the central medium through which God chooses to “become,” Rahner raises a critical concern: if Christmas is celebrated merely as God’s entrance into an already existing world, we risk presupposing the prior existence of creation as a self-evident fact into which God subsequently inserts Godself. He remarks:

When we speak in this connection of the assumption of a human nature by the Word of God, then (although perhaps we should not) we have already presupposed man and human nature as a possibility. We have conceived creation as a self-evident fact and God’s becoming a creature as a subsequent event not at all self-evident but resting on that self-evident fact.<sup>531</sup>

When we speak of the Word of God assuming human nature, we often do so, even if only unconsciously, as if human nature already existed independently, and God simply entered into it afterward. This implies that creation is taken for granted as something self-evident, and God’s becoming human is treated as an additional event that depends on that prior fact of creation.

Rahner clarifies this view by portraying God as the “prodigal” who freely and lavishly expends Godself into finitude. In this prodigal self-giving, the human person emerges as God’s own historical self-projection and the privileged locus of God’s indwelling Spirit. While it is true, Rahner affirms, that God must be conceived as distinct from the human person—as Creator is not identical with creature—it is equally true that God can be understood as the “prodigal” who lovingly “squanders” or pours Godself radically into finite existence, so that the human person emerges as God’s historical “other.” In this way, the human person arises within history and space as the concrete self-projection of the prodigal God. Rahner states:

The world, as it actually is, exists because God is the prodigal [*Gott der Verschwenderische ist*] who in fact squanders himself and that when he does *this*, then he is in the other into which he divests himself, in what we call a

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531. Rahner, “Zur Theologie der Weihnachtsfeier,” 103; “Thoughts on the Theology,” 31–32.

man—the absolute openness for God—and finally because God cannot divest himself in any other way than by creating what is capable of receiving him. When God ‘lets *himself* go outside of himself’, then there appears man—who for this very reason is pure openness for God—out of the very fringe of nothingness (i.e. of the material).<sup>532</sup>

The world exists because God, in absolute freedom, chooses to squander Godself out, in love, into a world that has become God’s prodigal self-projection. When this happens, the result is the human person: a creature drawn from the brink of nothingness, yet defined by a pure and radical openness to receive God’s own divine love.

For Rahner, this radical self-projection of God into finitude constitutes the very heart of Christmas. The authentic celebration of Christmas, therefore, depends on acknowledging that the Logos did not assume human nature as an instrument, but as the very reality through which God expresses and reveals Godself in space and time. What is celebrated at Christmas is nothing less than God’s absolute self-giving and total solidarity with creation. In this light, the humanity of God in Christ emerges as the central category for all Christological and anthropological reflection, since it is precisely in the concrete human existence of Jesus (*Leiblichkeit* of Christ) that the mystery of God and the meaning of human existence are inseparably bound together.<sup>533</sup>

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532. Rahner, “Zur Theologie der Weihnachtsfeier,” 103; “Thoughts on the Theology of Christmas,” 32.

533. In “Zur Theologie der Menschwerdung” (1958), Rahner deepens his commitment to placing Jesus’ humanity at the centre of Christological discourse. He emphasizes that Christ’s humanity—his Incarnation and historical existence—is not peripheral but foundational to Christian theology. The Incarnation, the Word becoming flesh, is for Rahner the essential mystery from which all Christian life and reflection arise. In this historical manifestation, God fully enters into human existence and experience, thereby affirming the enduring significance of both humanity and history. Because of the Incarnation, Rahner argues, human nature itself becomes a mystery, no longer definable in purely philosophical or natural terms, but always pointing beyond itself to the infinite mystery of God. He describes the human being as “an indefinability come to consciousness of itself,” meaning that the truth of human existence lies in its radical openness to divine transcendence. In Christ, this openness is brought to its absolute fulfilment: the Incarnation becomes “the unique, supreme case of the total actualization of human reality.” Rahner’s incarnational theology insists on the full authenticity of Christ’s humanity, explicitly rejecting any tendencies toward Docetism or Monophysitism—views that reduce Christ’s humanity to a mere appearance or instrumental vehicle of the divine. For Rahner, such views are not only mistaken but heretical, for they deny the core Christian claim that God has truly become human. The flesh of Jesus is not a mere mask but the genuine site of God’s self-communication in history. The historical humanity of Christ—that is, his *Leiblichkeit*—thus becomes indispensable to all Christological discourse, as that which reveals the true depth of the unity between God and the human person. For further

#### 7.4. Christology and Cosmic History: An Evolutionary Interpretation

This section situates Rahner's Christology within an evolutionary understanding of the world. In "Die Christologie innerhalb einer evolutiven Weltanschauung" (1962), he argues that the Incarnation represents the culmination of cosmic history, where matter, through active self-transcendence, reaches its definitive unity with spirit in the humanity of Jesus.<sup>534</sup> The section examines four themes: (1) self-consciousness as the unity of spirit and matter, (2) active self-transcendence as the historical progression of the cosmos toward spiritual-consciousness, (3) the experience of God as the final goal of this transcendence, and (4) the humanity of Jesus as the climax of this evolutionary development.

##### 7.4.1. The Unity of Spirit and Matter in Human Self-Consciousness

Rahner identifies human self-consciousness as the privileged locus where matter and spirit converge, making the human person the concrete site in which God's creative act reaches its fullest realization. According to him, traditional Christian teaching holds that the world was created by God. Some interpretations mistakenly imagine this act of creation as a one-time event in which "matter" and "spirit" were created side by side and remained essentially separated from each other.<sup>535</sup> Rahner rejects this view, calling it both incorrect and un-Christian because it depicts the "spirit" as merely making use of the material world—

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discussion, see Karl Rahner, "Zur Theologie der Menschwerdung," in *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 12, *Menschsein und Menschwerdung Gottes: Studien zur Grundlegung der Dogmatik, zur Christologie, Theologischen Anthropologie und Eschatologie*, ed. Herbert Vorgrimler (Freiburg: Verlag Herder, 2005), 309–22; "On the Theology of the Incarnation," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 4, *More Recent Writings*, trans. Kevin Smyth (Baltimore, MD: Helicon Press; London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1966), 105–20.

534. See Karl Rahner, "Die Christologie innerhalb einer evolutiven Weltanschauung," in *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 15, *Verantwortung der Theologie: Im Dialog mit Naturwissenschaften und Gesellschaftstheorie*, ed. Hans-Dieter Mutschler (Freiburg: Verlag Herder, 2002), 219–247; "Christianity within an Evolutionary View of the World," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 5, *Later Writings*, trans. Karl-H. Kruger (Baltimore, MD: Helicon Press; London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1966), 157–92.

535. See Rahner, "Christianity within an Evolutionary View," 161.

treating it like an external stage or backdrop, as something completely separate and different from what it truly means to be spiritual.<sup>536</sup>

In this light, Rahner conceives the human person not as a composite of two distinct substances, spirit and matter, but as a single, self-conscious subject in whom these dimensions are integrally and originally united. In Christian theology, matter and spirit are not separate or opposed to each other.<sup>537</sup> Their unity appears most clearly in the human person, who is not merely a composite of spirit and matter, but a self-conscious unity in which the “one human being,” as an embodied subject, unfolds concretely in space and time.<sup>538</sup> Accordingly, the human being is not a composite of spirit and matter—as two distinct elements that happen to be subsequently joined together—but a single self-conscious subject in whom the unity of matter and spirit is understood as two inseparable dimensions of one integral human substance: “Man is not an unnatural or merely temporary composite of spirit and matter but is a unity which is logically and objectively prior to the diversity of his distinguishable elements ... into which this originally one being of man necessarily spreads and unfolds itself.”<sup>539</sup> Thus, the human person is not a temporary or artificial composite of spirit and matter, but a single substance whose original nature unfolds into both a spiritual and material unity. This unity is original, and it is from it that the understanding of the many dimensions of human existence—such as body and soul, intellect and sensibility, categorial and transcendental openness—subsequently emerges.

Attributing this unity to self-consciousness, Rahner insists that human self-consciousness cannot be isolated from the material world, since it arises out of the world

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536. See Rahner, “Christianity within an Evolutionary View,” 161.

537. See also Rahner, *Foundations*, 181–82.

538. See Rahner, “Christianity within an Evolutionary View,” 161.

539. Rahner, “Christianity within an Evolutionary View,” 161–62.

itself as the original unity of spirit and matter. He argues that the material world is not something separate from or secondary to human existence, but is part of the original unity of spirit and matter, which assumes its clearest expression in the conscious human subject.<sup>540</sup> For Rahner, the unity of spirit and matter in the human person must extend into and include the entire cosmos, since self-consciousness must encompass all dimensions of human experience—not just the consciousness of the human spirit, but also the concrete material world in which spirit finds itself.<sup>541</sup> Accordingly, even if one cannot imagine what a perfect material world would look like, and even if such an image is not necessary for Christian faith, the material world or cosmos must still be included in any understanding of human self-consciousness.<sup>542</sup>

Inasmuch as the material world cannot be dismissed as something temporary or irrelevant for human consciousness, Rahner argues that we can only speak meaningfully about the cosmos or the material world in relation to the human person. All knowledge of the material world comes from and through human experience and consciousness. Even a scientific understanding of the world does not exactly reveal what the world is “in-itself” (*Ansich*), but rather what it is as perceived and interpreted by the self-conscious human subject.<sup>543</sup> Accordingly, since all knowledge and experience of the world happen through the light of the intellect—that is, through the self-conscious human “spirit”—Rahner explains that spirit is, in a proper sense, the human person who becomes fully aware of itself in the world by opening its consciousness to the reality of “matter.”<sup>544</sup> Since the human “spirit” is

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540. See Rahner, “Christianity within an Evolutionary View,” 162.

541. See Rahner, “Christianity within an Evolutionary View,” 162.

542. See Rahner, “Christianity within an Evolutionary View,” 162.

543. See Rahner, “Christianity within an Evolutionary View,” 162.

544. See Rahner, “Christianity within an Evolutionary View,” 162.

also always in unity with “matter,” self-consciousness necessarily involves encountering one’s material and embodied structure in its concrete, individual, and unrepeatable form.<sup>545</sup>

“Matter,” then, is not something that the spirit chooses or creates, but something inevitably given—something that cannot be disposed of.<sup>546</sup> It is through this original unity with matter that the human spirit comes to know, accept, and love itself as a concrete being in the world. Rahner writes:

Starting from the original self-experience of the one man, however, it can be said that spirit is the one man in so far as he becomes conscious of himself in an absolute consciousness of being-given to-himself. ... To the extent in which man is matter, he grasps himself and the environment necessarily belonging to him in so far as the act of this return to himself—in the experience of his orientation to a mystery which must be accepted lovingly—always and primarily takes place only in an encounter with the individual, with what shows itself spontaneously and with the concrete which cannot be disposed of but is given unavoidably.<sup>547</sup>

As such, spirit is not something separate from matter, but the human person itself, who becomes self-conscious in the world—always in and through a unity with matter. This self-consciousness unfolds through an encounter with the concrete reality of one’s own material existence in the world (*Leiblichkeit*), which cannot be chosen or discarded but must be lovingly accepted as a mystery.

For Rahner, matter holds deep theological and anthropological significance because it is essential to human self-consciousness. Since the human spirit can only express itself through matter, matter becomes, from the very beginning, the condition that makes this concrete self-expression possible in space and time. In this view, the human person, as spirit, can only appear and act in the world through material existence. Matter, then, is not something outside or beneath the reach of spirit, but the spirit becoming present to itself in

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545. See Rahner, “Christianity within an Evolutionary View,” 162.

546. See Rahner, “Christianity within an Evolutionary View,” 163.

547. Rahner, “Die Christologie innerhalb,” 223–224; “Christianity within an Evolutionary,” 162–63.

the world—as a kind of self-conscious “otherness.”<sup>548</sup>

Rahner argues that matter grounds human experience in space and time, functioning as the condition that makes individuality, freedom, and genuine communication possible, even when we cannot reflect on or objectify this experience. It is through matter that the human person encounters a sense of distance or estrangement from itself as spirit—an estrangement necessary for entering into real communication and relationship with other human spirits in the world. Matter, then, as a principle of individuation, provides the grounding for the existence of the “other”:

Matter is the condition of what we experience directly as space and time (precisely when we cannot objectify this for ourselves); it is the condition of that otherness which estranges man from himself, which forms the requirement for the possibility of a direct intercommunication with other spiritual existents in space and time—i.e. in history. Matter is the basis for the pre-required existence of the ‘other.’<sup>549</sup>

Matter is the condition through which spirit becomes present to itself in space and time as a kind of self-conscious “otherness.” It grounds human experience historically and introduces the necessary distance or estrangement that allows humans to be individuals, to relate to others, and to exercise their freedom. In this way, matter (*Leiblichkeit*) becomes the concrete material field where real human communication and relationship with self and others become possible.

#### **7.4.2. Active Self-Transcendence: The Emergence of Spirit from Matter**

Rahner understands active self-transcendence as the historical process by which matter evolves into spirit, culminating in the emergence of human consciousness and subjectivity.<sup>550</sup> For him, human self-consciousness arises as the historical outcome of this

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548. See Rahner, “Christianity within an Evolutionary View,” 163.

549. Rahner, “Die Christologie innerhalb,” 224; “Christianity within an Evolutionary View,” 163.

550. For further discussion on active self-transcendence, see *Foundations*, 183–86.

process: the human spirit is the self-consciousness of matter itself as it transcends toward spirit. According to Rahner, this self-consciousness of matter did not exist from the outset but unfolded gradually in history through a real progression in time and space.<sup>551</sup> Thus, the human spirit did not begin by already being aware of itself through matter from the beginning; rather, its self-consciousness emerged historically. Rahner describes this development as a genuine act of “self-transcendence,” whereby something “lower” (matter) reaches beyond itself toward a higher level of perfection, becoming a self-conscious spirit in the world.<sup>552</sup>

This self-transcendence from matter to spirit is not merely a passive unfolding that leaves matter unchanged, but an active movement of becoming—an active self-transcendence of matter toward its spiritual fulfilment.<sup>553</sup> Although this conscious “becoming” from matter to spirit occurred in space and time, Rahner argues that one must not interpret the relationship between matter and spirit in a Platonic sense. It is not the case that matter existed first and spirit was later added to it. Rather, from the beginning, matter and spirit always belonged together in an original unity. What took place in history was not the creation of spirit or its superimposition upon matter, but the historical emergence of spirit as the self-consciousness of matter within that unity.<sup>554</sup>

The historical progression from matter to spirit must be understood as a true act of self-transcendence, whereby a being actively moves toward a perfection it does not yet fully possess. Rahner insists that this must be conceived within the framework of a sound metaphysics of creation. The emergence of spirit from matter cannot be interpreted as being

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551. See Rahner, “Christianity within an Evolutionary View,” 164.

552. See Rahner, “Christianity within an Evolutionary View,” 164.

553. See Rahner, “Christianity within an Evolutionary View,” 164.

554. See Rahner, “Christianity within an Evolutionary View,” 164–65.

arising from non-being, nor can emptiness be considered the source of fullness. To do so would contradict the fundamental metaphysical principle of causality, which affirms that something cannot come from nothing. He writes:

This [becoming] means, however, that if it is really to be taken seriously, ‘becoming’ must be understood as a real self-transcendence, a surpassing of self or active filling up of the empty. This notion of active self-transcendence [*aktive Selbsttranszendenz*]*—*self-transcendence by which an existing and acting being actively approaches to the higher perfection still lacking to it—must not, however, turn non-being into the very ground of being and turn emptiness as such into the source of fullness—in other words, we must not violate the metaphysical principle of causality.<sup>555</sup>

The self-conscious progression from matter to spirit must be understood as an active self-transcendence, wherein an already existing being moves toward a higher perfection it does not yet possess.<sup>556</sup> “Becoming,” in this sense, does not imply that the human spirit arises from nothingness. Such an interpretation would violate the metaphysical principle of causality. The progression from matter to spirit is, rather, the movement of an already existent being toward fuller self-realization. In this view, spirit is always a materially embodied spirit. It does not emerge from nothing but from its original unity with matter from the beginning. Spirit exists, therefore, as both the potency and actuality of matter in space and time.<sup>557</sup>

### 7.4.3. God as the Origin and Goal of Transcendental Becoming

Rahner turns to God as both the originating source and definitive goal of active self-

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555. Rahner, “Die Christologie innerhalb,” 225; See Rahner, “Christianity within,” 164–65.

556. Cf. Joseph Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), 167–71. Ratzinger (1927–2022) centres his critique on Rahner’s notion of “self-transcendence,” particularly in relation to the Incarnation. While Rahner often describes Christ as “the model of the true and perfect man” (the God-man), Ratzinger questions whether Jesus should be regarded as “Saviour of the world” merely because he perfectly achieved self-transcendence, or whether salvation in Christ and in the Church must instead be grounded in something irreducibly unique, beyond a transcendental anthropology construed in humanistic terms. In this light, Ratzinger challenges Rahner’s anthropological starting point in “knowledge,” warning against any suggestion that salvation arises from an inward “mind-process” through which the human person autonomously discovers Being. Rather, salvation is God’s gracious self-communication—“Being beyond thought and reflection”—encountered not in inner self-possession but as pure gift, received in Christ and in the Church.

557. See Rahner, “Christianity within an Evolutionary View,” 165.

transcendence. By locating the origin and goal of this process in God, he emphasizes that the progression from matter to spirit is grounded in Absolute Mystery, the transcendent source that empowers self-transcendence while remaining utterly distinct from it. At the same time, Rahner cautions against a potential misunderstanding: the power of becoming expressed in active self-transcendence cannot be attributed solely to the original unity of matter and spirit. Were this the case, “becoming” would be nothing more than a disguise, since what appears as “becoming” would already exist in full potency from the outset within the original unity of matter and spirit.<sup>558</sup> Put differently, the power that enables matter to become conscious of itself as spirit must lie beyond the original unity of matter and spirit. Yet this power is not external or alien to that unity; rather, it is always already constitutively present within it as the very condition of its possibility.<sup>559</sup>

This a priori enabling power—at once interior to the original unity of matter and spirit and yet distinct from it—is what Rahner identifies as the Absolute Incomprehensible Mystery. God, as Absolute Mystery, empowers matter from within, drawing it toward Godself as both the origin and the horizon of its spiritual fulfilment. In this relation of intimacy and distinction, God is the source and goal of active self-transcendence but not identical with the process itself. Were God identical with the process, the finite would already be infinite in potency and thus incapable of any genuine “becoming.” He writes:

On the one hand, this absolute fullness of being must be thought of as something so interior to the finite being moving towards its fulfilment that the finite being is empowered by it to achieve a really active self-transcendence and does not merely receive this new reality passively as something effected by God. On the other hand, this power of self-transcendence must at the same time be thought of as so distinct from finite, acting being that it is not permissible to conceive it as a constitutive principle of the essence of this finite being achieving itself. For otherwise, if the absoluteness of being—which gives efficacy to a being and empowers it to be effective—were to constitute the nature of the finite acting being, then this being would no longer

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558. See Rahner, “Christianity within an Evolutionary View,” 165.

559. See Rahner, “Christianity within an Evolutionary View,” 165.

be capable of any real becoming in time and history, since it would already possess the absolute fullness of being as something absolutely proper to it.<sup>560</sup>

The historical progression from matter to its spiritual fulfilment in God must not be misunderstood as something the human subject—conceived as the original unity of matter and spirit—accomplishes entirely on its own. While this progression is indeed conscious and historical, it takes place only because the finite human spirit is empowered by a transcendent source: the Absolute Mystery. God, though interior to the metaphysical structure of the human spirit and enabling it from within to undergo active self-transcendence, remains at the same time utterly distinct from the human subject. Thus, God is both the inner origin and the transcendent goal of the historical progression of the finite human subject from matter to spirit.<sup>561</sup>

The human spirit is the self-conscious being that emerges from the historical progression of matter into spirit. Because this progression unfolds within the history of the world, human self-consciousness cannot be separated from the history of the cosmos itself. The natural world, properly speaking, belongs to the transcendental consciousness of the human person. If the human being arises as the self-consciousness of matter within history, then the cosmic history of the world and its spiritual awakening in the human being are not two distinct realities. The cosmos grows towards the human, is carried forward in the human,

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560. Rahner, "Die Christologie innerhalb," 225–26; "Christianity within an Evolutionary View," 165.

561. While Rahner acknowledges that his reflections are speculative and abstract, he still attempts to explain how spirit becomes conscious in matter. In the unity of matter and spirit, he asserts, matter represents the lower dimension and spirit the higher (see Rahner, "Christianity within an Evolutionary View," 168.). It is always the lower that prepares the way for the higher. Thus, in the unfolding of history, matter slowly evolves and adapts in such a way that it becomes capable of receiving the full self-consciousness of spirit. This gradual development of matter toward the emergence of spirit is what Rahner understands as active self-transcendence. Matter, in its own historical progression, adjusts and transforms itself so that it can reach the threshold where the self-consciousness of spirit becomes possible. The lower order does not vanish in this process but is carried along and transformed as it becomes integrated into its own self-consciousness. Yet the exact moment at which this leap occurs remains unclear—it can only be recognized from the standpoint of a later stage of development, when the new condition has already begun to unfold (see Rahner, "Christianity within an Evolutionary View," 168).

and is at once preserved and surpassed in the conscious history of the human spirit:

If man is thus the self-transcendence of living matter, then the history of Nature and spirit forms an inner, graded unity in which natural history develops towards man, continues in him as his history, is conserved and surpassed in him and hence reaches its proper goal with and in the history of the human spirit. In so far as this history of Nature is dissolved in man into freedom, this natural history reaches its goal in the history of the free spirit. In so far as the history of man always still includes the natural history of living matter, it is always still supported—even in the midst of its freedom—by the structures and necessities of this material world. . . . Thus, man and nature can reach their one common goal only by activity which is spiritual and by spirituality which is activity.<sup>562</sup>

Since the emergence of the human spirit takes place within the unfolding of cosmic history, Rahner insists that human self-consciousness cannot be divorced from the history of the natural world. Rather, the cosmos and the human spirit belong to a single, unified history in which the natural world evolves toward its self-realization in the human spirit. The human being thus represents the culmination of the cosmic progression from matter to spirit.<sup>563</sup> In this sense, world history is the history of the human spirit.

For Rahner, human self-consciousness is not an isolated awareness detached from the world, but the concrete mode in which the cosmos itself becomes conscious of its own existence in and through the human spirit. The human person becomes self-conscious only within, and in relation to, the world. Human self-consciousness is therefore a form of “cosmic self-consciousness”—a way in which the universe awakens to itself through the human spirit, and vice versa.<sup>564</sup> This cosmic awakening is realized uniquely in each individual, so that the material cosmos becomes, in a sense, the one body through which many personal self-consciousnesses emerge:

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562. Rahner, “Die Christologie innerhalb,” 228; “Christianity within an Evolutionary View,” 168.

563. For further discussion on the central place of the human person in cosmic history, see Rahner, *Foundations*, 188–91.

564. See Rahner, “Christianity within an Evolutionary View,” 172.

The one material cosmos is, as it were, the one body of the multifarious self-presence [der “*eine*” Leib “*viel*”-fältiger Selbstgegebenheit] of this self-same cosmos and of its orientation to its absolute and infinite foundation. Even though this cosmic bodily presence [*diese kosmische Leibhaftigkeit*] of the innumerable personal self-consciousnesses in which the cosmos can become conscious of itself begins to appear (like man’s own bodily presence in the narrower sense) only very tentatively in the self-consciousness and freedom of the individual human being, it is nevertheless present in every man as something which is intended to be and can become actual. For in his bodiliness [*in seiner Leiblichkeit*], every man is an element of the cosmos which cannot really be delimited and cut off from it, and in this bodiliness he communicates with the whole cosmos in such a way that through this bodiliness of man taken as the other element of belonging to the spirit, the cosmos really presses forward to this self-presence in the spirit.<sup>565</sup>

Human self-consciousness arises only in relation to the world, meaning that the human subject does not stand apart from the cosmos but emerges as its self-conscious expression.

Human consciousness is therefore a form of cosmic self-consciousness. Each person uniquely embodies this cosmic awakening, so that the material cosmos becomes, in a real sense, the single body through which many individual self-consciousnesses unfold.

Rahner understands human self-consciousness as the gradual historical process by which the cosmos awakens to itself through the human person as an embodied spirit. Human self-consciousness is the means by which the cosmos becomes aware of itself in and through human embodiment. This self-consciousness, Rahner argues, is not fully realized all at once but unfolds gradually in both individual and collective human history.<sup>566</sup> Though often marked by failure, resistance, and distortion, the process by which the cosmos becomes conscious of itself in the human person is ultimately ordered toward a final goal. It is not a random movement, but a purposeful evolution in which the material world, through the embodied human spirit (*Leiblichkeit*), strives toward its ultimate fulfilment in human freedom and self-consciousness.<sup>567</sup> This fulfilment reaches its climax when God, the Absolute

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565. Rahner, “Die Christologie innerhalb,” 230; “Christianity within an Evolutionary View,” 170.

566. See Rahner, “Christianity within an Evolutionary View,” 171.

567. See Rahner, “Christianity within an Evolutionary View,” 171–72.

Mystery and ground of all being, communicates Godself directly to the world in the bodily Incarnation of Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>568</sup> What Christian theology calls the immortality of the soul is, for Rahner, the final realization and consummation of cosmic consciousness in God—its perfection in grace and glory in the beatific vision.<sup>569</sup>

#### 7.4.4. The Incarnation as the Climax of Cosmic Self-Consciousness

Rahner presents the Incarnation of Jesus as the definitive climax of the cosmos' history of self-transcendence, the moment in which divine self-communication becomes irrevocably embodied within human history.<sup>570</sup> For him, Christology must be interpreted within the wider horizon of cosmic history as the history of active self-transcendence. From the very beginning, the dynamic progression from matter to spirit is always already oriented towards fulfilment in divine life.<sup>571</sup> Jesus of Nazareth, the Saviour, is the singular historical subject in whom this fulfilment is definitively and irrevocably present, embodied, and made recognizable in history.<sup>572</sup> In this sense, Jesus represents the true climax of the history of active self-transcendence, and his bodily Incarnation becomes the interpretive key for understanding salvation history as the history of cosmic consciousness.<sup>573</sup>

In Christ, cosmic consciousness achieves its definitive goal in human embodiment. In this view, the doctrine of the Hypostatic Union becomes clearer when interpreted in light of

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568. Cf. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man*, trans. Bernard Wall (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), 261–76. Teilhard de Chardin (1881–1955) envisions cosmic evolution as a process of increasing complexity and collective consciousness (the *noosphere*), culminating in the Omega Point—the final convergence of matter and spirit in Christ. Like Teilhard, Rahner affirms that human consciousness arises through the universe's intrinsic dynamism of self-transcendence.

569. See Rahner, "Christianity within an Evolutionary View," 173.

570. See also Rahner, *Foundations*, 192.

571. See Rahner, "Christianity within an Evolutionary View," 174.

572. See Rahner, "Christianity within an Evolutionary View," 176.

573. See Rahner, "Christianity within an Evolutionary View," 176.

this evolutionary understanding of the world. Christ, the divine Logos, is truly part of the cosmos: born of a woman, and fully human.<sup>574</sup> His embodied human nature marks the historical moment at which matter, through its unity with spirit, becomes fully present:

Jesus is true man; he is truly a part of the earth, truly a moment in the biological evolution of this world, a moment of human natural history, for he is born of woman; he is a man who in his spiritual, human and finite subjectivity is just like us, a receiver of that self-communication of God by grace which we affirm of all men—and hence of the cosmos—as the climax of development in which the world comes absolutely into its own presence and into the direct presence of God. Jesus is the one who—by what we call his obedience, his prayer and the freely accepted destiny of his death—has achieved also the acceptance of his divinely given grace and direct presence to God which he possesses as man.<sup>575</sup>

The Hypostatic Union becomes intelligible when viewed in the light of Jesus' humanity.

Christ, the divine Logos, is not an intruder into history but a constitutive moment within it.

He is fully and truly human. His humanity marks the point at which matter, in its inner orientation toward spirit, achieves absolute self-consciousness in the finite human subject. In Jesus, the historical progression of matter towards spirit reaches its definitive fulfilment.

The Incarnation must therefore be seen as an integral moment within the history of creation as the climax of the cosmic progression from matter to spirit, culminating in human embodiment (*Leiblichkeit*). While it remains theologically possible to affirm that God could have created without becoming incarnate, revelation discloses that the bodily Incarnation of Christ (*Leiblichkeit* of Christ) is the concrete event in which the divinization of creation takes place.<sup>576</sup> The distinguishing feature of the Incarnation, then, is not that it confers a different kind of grace to the world, but that grace becomes historically definitive and irrevocably bound to human bodiliness (*Leiblichkeit*).<sup>577</sup> The Hypostatic Union, in this light, is not

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574. See Rahner, "Christianity within an Evolutionary View," 176.

575. Rahner, "Die Christologie innerhalb," 231; "Christianity within an Evolutionary View," 176.

576. See Rahner, "Christianity within an Evolutionary View," 181.

577. See Rahner, "Christianity within an Evolutionary View," 182.

merely a conceptual solution to the question of how two natures coexist in the Logos; it expresses the historical moment in which the divine and the human become irrevocably united in concrete bodiliness. As Rahner puts it, this union “must be conceived as an irrevocable unity between this human reality and God making a separation between the proclamation and the giver of this proclamation impossible.”<sup>578</sup> This affirms that in Jesus, the human and divine are so united that bodiliness itself becomes the concrete site of God’s presence in history.<sup>579</sup>

To conclude, Rahner’s Christology affirms with clarity that the humanity of Jesus is not an accessory to divine revelation but its constitutive medium. Against pietistic tendencies that dissolve Christ’s humanity into a vague image of his divinity, and against speculative approaches that abstract Christological formulas from the lived human experience of Christ, Rahner insists that the concrete humanity of Jesus remains the enduring centre of God’s self-communication.

Devotionally, Rahner presents the Sacred Heart of Christ, as the concrete symbol of his human love, affirming that God’s grace is mediated through the bodily, historical, and affective reality of Jesus’ human heart. Doctrinally, he shows that the Chalcedonian definition of Christ’s two natures, while indispensable as a safeguard of orthodoxy, must be continually reinterpreted in the light Jesus’ historical existence. Dogmatic formulations are not exhaustive conclusions but provisional signposts pointing to the inexhaustible mystery of Christ’s bodily Incarnation.

Liturgically, Rahner situates the Incarnation within the mystery of Christmas, where God’s prodigal self-giving is encountered in a “silent” disposition which focuses on human vulnerability and finitude. The Incarnation is not an external assumption of a ready-made

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578. See Rahner, “Christianity within an Evolutionary View,” 183.

579. See Rahner, “Christianity within an Evolutionary View,” 183–84.

human nature, but God's definitive entry into the depths of creaturely existence, where human embodiment and mortality become the privileged locus of redemption. In Jesus of Nazareth, God's transcendence is revealed as tender nearness, a grace that embraces the totality of human life. Cosmologically, he extends Christology into an evolutionary view of the world, portraying human self-consciousness as arising through active self-transcendence and finding its definitive fulfilment in the bodily Incarnation of the Word made flesh.

## Chapter 8

### **Bodiliness and Anthropology: The Symbolic Structure of the Human Person**

As Anton Losinger observes, classical theological anthropology conceives the human being “as something that exists in itself, a sort of *quodammodo omnia* (‘in a certain way everything’).” Rahner, by contrast, situates the human person as a being-in-the-world whose existence cannot be abstracted from the wider dynamics of grace operative in history. Anthropology, therefore, is transcendental, and properly speaking, theology itself—intrinsically interwoven with Christology, ecclesiology, sacramentology, and eschatology. For Rahner, transcendental anthropology is a theology of symbolic reality. Symbols are the concrete sacramental forms in which reality discloses or communicates itself concretely in the world. Chief among these symbols is human bodiliness—the primordial symbol in which the unity of spirit and matter becomes the concrete locus of divine–human encounter, supremely realized in the Incarnation as the primary event of grace.

Far from reducing symbols to mere metaphorical representation, Rahner develops a transcendental anthropology in which symbolism is grounded in the very structure of being itself. All reality, he argues, is symbolic by nature: every being expresses itself through plural or multiple dimensions that does not diminish but perfect its unity. This symbolic plural self-expression of being takes concrete form in *Leiblichkeit* (bodiliness), the fundamental medium or *Realsymbol* of the unity between the divine and the human, the spiritual and the material, the body and the soul.

This chapter unfolds in two sections. The first develops Rahner’s transcendental ontology of symbol, showing how a being attains its full actuality only through self-expression in visible, embodied form. Here he draws on Thomistic metaphysics and Trinitarian theology to argue that unity and plurality in being are not opposed but mutually

constitutive. The second section applies this ontology to theological anthropology, presenting human bodiliness as the *Realsymbol* of the total person, culmination in the Incarnation of Jesus of Nazareth.

By situating bodiliness at the centre of his theology of symbol, Rahner provides the foundation for an anthropology in which the human body is not to be seen merely as a vessel inhabiting the soul but as the soul's concrete, historical and embodied self-expression in the world. In this way, Rahner's anthropology of symbolic reality establishes the basis for a theological understanding of the human person, the Incarnation, the sacraments of the Church, and the Church itself as concrete symbolic realities.

### 8.1. The Transcendental Ontology of Symbol

This section investigates the ontological structure of symbolic reality in Rahner's theology, moving beyond merely representational or metaphorical understandings. It develops Rahner's fundamental claim that all being is symbolic in nature, expressing itself through an inner plurality that does not diminish but rather perfects its unity. For Rahner, this inner plurality is grounded in the intrinsic nature of being itself—its dynamic capacity for self-expression, made visible through concrete material embodiment. In this regard, the section will address the following themes: (1) the symbol beyond representation; (2) original unity and the symbolic structure of being; and (3) matter and form as symbolic unity.

#### 8.1.1. The Symbol: Beyond Representation

In "Zur Theologie des Symbols" (1959), Rahner prescind from the context of Catholic devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and opens a critical theological inquiry into the nature of symbols.<sup>580</sup> He begins by affirming that all expressions of this devotion—from

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580. Karl Rahner, "Zur Theologie des Symbols," in *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 18, *Leiblichkeit der Gnade: Schriften zur Sakramentenlehre*, ed. Wendelin Knoch and Tobias Trappe (Freiburg: Verlag Herder, 2003), 423–

the *sensus fidelium*<sup>581</sup> to theological reflection and magisterial teaching—agree that the heart of Jesus is a symbol of God’s love.<sup>582</sup> This common agreement leads him to a deeper questioning: what exactly does it mean to call the Sacred Heart a symbol? He argues that while the term *symbol* is frequently used—especially in Catholic devotional and sacramental theology—its meaning is often assumed to be self-evident, whereas defining a symbol is neither simple nor univocal. As a result, the widespread common use of the term has hindered a clearer theological understanding of what the Sacred Heart, as the symbol of God’s love, truly entails.<sup>583</sup>

While the history and linguistic development of the term “symbol” may shed light on its meaning, Rahner contends that the real theological question requires an ontological approach. To explore the full question of symbolic reality, he holds that a historical and philosophical investigation would be required. This investigation includes important aspects such as the origin and development of the concept of symbol, along with related terms like “sign,” “figure,” “image,” and “appearance.”<sup>584</sup> While acknowledging that these historical and linguistic insights could illuminate the deeper meaning of the concept, he sets them aside and approaches the subject from an ontological perspective. He begins with the foundational claim: “all beings are by their nature symbolic, because they necessarily ‘express’ themselves

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57; “The Theology of the Symbol,” in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 4, *More Recent Writings*, trans. Kevin Smyth (Baltimore, MD: Helicon Press; London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1966), 221–52.

581. Here, the *sensus fidelium* refers to devotion as practiced by people of ordinary or simple faith. This must be distinguished from its formal theological understanding as the supernatural instinct of the faithful, given by the Holy Spirit, by which the whole people of God adheres to, penetrates, and applies the truths of the Gospel in daily life. For more details on this theological understanding, see Paul McPartlan, “The Sensus Fidei: A Vital Resource for the Church,” accessed February 19, 2025, [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti\\_documents/rc\\_cti\\_20140625\\_mcpartlan-sensus-fidei\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20140625_mcpartlan-sensus-fidei_en.html).

582. See Rahner, “The Theology of the Symbol,” 221–22.

583. See Rahner, “The Theology of the Symbol,” 222.

584. See Rahner, “The Theology of the Symbol,” 224.

in order to attain their own nature.”<sup>585</sup>

Rahner cautions against a superficial notion of symbolism that treats the symbol and what it signifies as two separate, self-contained realities linked only by external resemblance or agreement. From the very beginning, he clarifies what he means by “symbolic,” asserting that if, by symbol, one assumes the existence of two separate realities—each already complete and intelligible in itself—that merely “agree” with or “represent” each other at some point, then one is already operating with a secondary or superficial understanding of symbolism. Such a view reduces a symbol to a matter of external similarity or resemblance. He states:

We should already be dealing with merely derivative modes of symbolic being if we started with the fact that two realities, each of which is supposed to be already constituted in its essence and intelligible of itself, ‘agreed’ with one another on a certain point . . . . Symbols would then only vary, and be distinguishable from one another, by the degree and precise mode, of this subsequent similarity between the two realities. Since in the long run everything agrees in some way or another with everything else, to start the analysis of symbols this way would make it impossible to distinguish really genuine symbols (‘symbolic realities’) from merely arbitrary ‘signs’, ‘signals’ and ‘codes’ (‘symbolic representations’).<sup>586</sup>

A superficial understanding of symbolic reality assumes two separate, self-contained realities that merely resemble or correspond to each other in some way. In this view, a symbol is simply an external sign pointing to something else by virtue of some shared feature or agreement. But Rahner rejects this approach, arguing that it reduces symbolism to mere representation or analogy and fails to distinguish true symbolic realities from arbitrary signs or codes.<sup>587</sup> For him, genuine symbols must be more than merely similar to what they

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585. Rahner, “The Theology of the Symbol,” 224.

586. Rahner, “Zur Theologie des Symbols,” 426; “The Theology of the Symbol,” 224–25.

587. Cf. Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), 42–43. Tillich (1886–1965) defines a symbol as that which participates in the reality to which it points, arguing that religious symbols mediate the presence of the divine through cultural and existential forms. While Tillich’s account emphasizes the dynamic and historical nature of symbols, it differs from Rahner’s ontological claim that the *real symbol* does not merely point beyond itself but is the self-expression of being itself.

signify—they must participate in the reality they express.

A symbol, according to Rahner, is the most fundamental and original way in which one reality can represent another. “Symbol,” in this sense, is not merely a sign pointing to something else—it is a mode of representation in which one reality “makes another present”—not just as something for others to observe, but rendering the other reality present “to itself,” allowing the represented reality truly “to be there.”<sup>588</sup> To explain this definition further, he begins with an ontological assumption: that all finite beings are, by nature, “multiple.” This means that each finite being contains within itself a real plurality—that is, there are multiple ways in which a finite being can express itself externally.<sup>589</sup> For Rahner, this multiplicity belongs to the inner structure of being itself—it is part of what a finite being is. Because of this inner plurality or multiplicity, each finite being is also a “symbol”—something that, expresses its inner essence outwardly in many ways.<sup>590</sup>

Rahner challenges the assumption that inner plurality within a being necessarily signals imperfection, showing instead that plurality and unity can coexist without contradiction. Inner plurality in created beings, while it may signal a lack of perfection, is not necessarily a flaw. Drawing from the doctrine of the Trinity, Rahner argues that it is possible to find plurality even in the most perfect, simple being. In God, there exists a real, though relative, plural distinction of persons, but this plurality does not imply imperfection. Rather, it is a plurality in unity:

We do not mean to assert that an intrinsic plurality [*innere Pluralität*] and distinction must always be merely the stigma of the finiteness of a being. We know, on the contrary, from the mystery of the Trinity ... that there is a true

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588. In Rahner’s words, “Our task will be to look for the highest and most primordial manner in which one reality can represent another – considering the matter primarily from the formal ontological point of view. And we call this supreme and primal representation, in which one reality renders another present (primarily ‘for itself’ and only secondarily for others), a symbol: the representation which allows the other ‘to be there’” (Rahner, “The Theology of the Symbol,” 225).

589. See Rahner, “The Theology of the Symbol,” 226.

590. See Rahner, “The Theology of the Symbol,” 226.

and real—even though ‘only’ relative—distinction of ‘persons’ in the supreme simplicity of God, and hence a plurality, at least in this sense. . . . It is therefore true: a being is, of itself, independently of any comparison with anything else, plural in its unity.<sup>591</sup>

Inner plurality within a being—such as the multiple essential dimensions that make up a being—is not necessarily a defect or a sign of limitation. Drawing on the doctrine of the Trinity, Rahner shows that even in God, who is supremely simple, there exists a real, though relative, distinction of persons. This plurality does not compromise divine perfection but reveals that unity and plurality can coexist perfectly within a being. Therefore, it is possible for a being to be truly “multiple” while also containing within itself a real unity. Similarly, the multiplicity found in finite creatures does not necessarily signify their limitation, but—however faintly it may be, especially in the light of revelation—a plurality in unity that reflects the multiple ways in which finite creatures participate in God’s absolute unity. Thus, for Rahner, we may cautiously but confidently affirm that being itself is always a unity in multiplicity.<sup>592</sup>

Rahner moves beyond a reductive notion of the symbol as mere representation to an understanding of it as the intrinsic self-expression of a reality, in which what is signified becomes truly present in the symbol. Applying this insight to the Sacred Heart, he asserts that the heart of Jesus is not simply an image pointing toward Christ’s love, but the concrete and enduring form in which that love is made present and accessible as the real symbol of the historically embodied human love of the Incarnate Word.

### **8.1.2. Original Unity and the Symbolic Structure of Being**

Rahner maintains that the plurality within a being, as visibly expressed through its concrete bodily symbol, must be understood as the unfolding of an original unity, not as an

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591. Rahner, “Zur Theologie des Symbols,” 428; “The Theology of the Symbol,” 226–27.

592. See Rahner, “The Theology of the Symbol,” 227.

artificial assembly of independent parts. Plurality within being is intrinsic to the nature of being itself. It must not be understood as a random collection of separate parts placed side by side, but as a dynamic unfolding that is found within the being itself.<sup>593</sup> The plural aspects within a being must have a genuine unity, precisely because they belong to the one being itself. If these plural elements existed independently and were only later joined together, then the unity of the being would be artificial and secondary—constituting an external assemblage of parts rather than a true ontological unity. According to Rahner, if the unity of being were simply a unity of parts, this would contradict the principle expressed by St Thomas: “*non enim plura secundum se uniuntur*” (there can be no union of things which are of themselves multiple).<sup>594</sup> Rather, Rahner insists that true unity can only exist where the plurality arises from an original unity within the being itself. The being must unfold or disclose itself into a plurality, and in doing so, it does not lose itself but rather fulfils its unity in and through this plural expressions. In other words, the unity of the being remains intact even as it expresses itself in multiple forms:

A plurality in an original and an originally superior unity can only be understood as follows: the ‘one’ develops, the plural stems from an original ‘one’, in a relationship of origin and consequence; the original unity, which also forms the unity which unites the plural, maintains itself while resolving itself and ‘dis-closing’ itself into a plurality in order to find itself precisely there.<sup>595</sup>

True unity is not a sum total of separate parts joined together, but a dynamic unfolding of an original, superior unity within plurality. Plurality arises from within the original unity of being itself and thus preserves the being’s unity. The “one” does not lose itself in becoming

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593. See Rahner, “The Theology of the Symbol,” 227.

594. See Rahner, “The Theology of the Symbol,” 227. Here, he references St. Thomas to emphasize his point: “*Si enim diversa in aliquo uniantur, necesse est huius unionis causam esse aliquam: non enim diversa secundum se uniuntur*” [If different things are united in something, there must be some cause of that union; for different things do not unite by themselves (*Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 65)].

595. Rahner, “Zur Theologie des Symbols,” 429; See Rahner, “The Theology of the Symbol,” 227.

multiple; rather, it fulfils its unity by expressing itself through the plurality that stems from within it. In this way, unity and multiplicity are not two realities opposed to each other, but are intrinsically related through a process of origin and self-disclosure—what Rahner calls “original unity.”

Rahner returns to the Trinity as the supreme model of original unity, showing that true unity is not absolute undifferentiated simplicity but unity that expresses itself in plurality. In God, there is both perfect unity and real distinction—three persons in one divine essence. According to him, it would be both theologically heretical and ontologically absurd to think that God would be more perfect if God were a completely undifferentiated unity without the distinction of persons.<sup>596</sup> The differentiation within the Trinity is a pure unity, a final and essential feature of divine perfection itself. Therefore, Rahner argues, plurality belongs to the very nature of unity—not as a temporary or imperfect feature, but as something definitive and essential. So, “being as such, and hence as one (*ens as unum*),” is perfected not in absolute simplicity, but by expressing itself in a plurality that flows from its own unity.<sup>597</sup> The distinct aspects of a being—such as existence and accidents—that emerge from this unity are not merely effects of an external efficient causality but originate from the inner unity of being itself. The multiple aspects are deeper than anything externally or superficially imposed on the being, because this multiplicity comes from the essential origin and nature of the being itself.<sup>598</sup>

For Rahner, every being is an original unity that necessarily unfolds or expresses itself in plural dimensions. Because plurality arises from and remains in harmony with the

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596. See Rahner, “The Theology of the Symbol,” 228.

597. See Rahner, “The Theology of the Symbol,” 228.

598. Rahner emphasizes this point as follows: “The distinct moments deriving from the ‘one’ which make for the perfection of its unity stem essentially, i.e. by their origin in and from another, from this most primary unity: they have therefore a more primary and basic ‘agreement’ with it than anything produced by efficient causality” (Rahner, “The Theology of the Symbol,” 228).

original structure or intrinsic nature of the being itself, it can be said that plurality expresses the inner unity in the being from which it arises. This observation affirms, once again, that in a being, the agreement between the plural parts and the whole is not something imposed from outside but arises naturally from their shared origin.<sup>599</sup> For Rahner, since this principle applies to being in general, each being, in its own way and according to its degree of reality, brings forth something plurally distinct from itself and yet remains united with it. In this dynamic, unity and distinction coexist together—the more perfect the being, the more it holds together its multiplicity and unity without contradiction. Thus, original unity expresses itself in a being through this unity in plurality. In other words, original unity is expressed in plurality because plurality is derived from the source of being itself and remains in agreement with that source. Plurality symbolizes the being itself from which it arises:

Each being, as a unity, possesses a plurality-implying perfection – formed by the special derivativeness of the plural from the original unity: the plural is in agreement with its source in a way which corresponds to its origin, and hence is ‘expression’ of its origin by an agreement which it owes to its origin. Since this holds good for being in general, we may say that each being forms, in its own way, more or less perfectly according to its degree of being, something distinct from itself and yet one with itself, ‘for’ its own fulfilment. (Here unity and distinction are correlatives which increase in like proportions, not in inverse proportions which would reduce each to be contradictory and exclusive of the other). And this differentiated being, which is still originally one, is in agreement because derivative [sic], and because derivatively in agreement is expressive.<sup>600</sup>

Every being is an original unity in plurality. It is this relationship of unity and plurality, of origin (essence) and distinction (form), that makes a being more perfect. The more a being is perfect, the more it holds together its inner unity and outer (expressive) multiplicity without contradiction.

The ontological foundation of Rahner’s theology of symbol is based on the principle

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599. See Rahner, “The Theology of the Symbol,” 228.

600. Rahner, “Zur Theologie des Symbols,” 430–31; “The Theology of the Symbol,” 228.

that every being, simply by being what it is, contains within itself an expressive plurality that belongs intrinsically and originally to its unity. This plurality does not contradict a being's unity but constitutes the very way in which this unity is perfected. If the being is already perfect—as in the case of the Trinity—then its plurality or distinction constitutes the very way in which that perfection is revealed.<sup>601</sup> Because plurality arises from an original unity that remains in agreement with the total being itself, the plurality or distinction functions as a kind of “self-expression” or “symbol” of the total being from which it arises.<sup>602</sup> In this way, what is plural and distinct from the original source nonetheless reflects that source and symbolizes it—at least in a “specificative” sense (by showing something specific about its origin), even if not always in a “reduplicative” sense (where the whole reality is simply reproduced).<sup>603</sup>

### 8.1.3. Matter and Form as Symbolic Unity

Rahner turns to the philosophical categories of matter and form to explain how a symbol is known in its unity of “origin” (essence) and “distinction” (material form). In Thomistic epistemology, knowledge is not seen as a process occurring only within the knower, leaving the known object completely unaffected. Rather, true knowledge depends on the actual reality of the being that is known:

On strictly scholastic terms, knowledge of a being by another is not the process which only takes place in the knower, and hence depends only on his potency and actuality, being related to an ‘object’ which persists completely unaffected in its own proper reality. On the contrary, the knowability and the actual knowledge of a being (as object of knowledge) depend on the degree of actuality in the thing to be known itself: *ens est cognitum et cognoscibile, in quantum ipsum est actu.*<sup>604</sup>

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601. See Rahner, “The Theology of the Symbol,” 229.

602. See Rahner, “The Theology of the Symbol,” 229.

603. See Rahner, “The Theology of the Symbol,” 229.

604. Rahner, “Zur Theologie des Symbols,” 431–32; “The Theology of the Symbol,” 230.

In classical Thomism, knowledge is not a one-sided act. It involves a real relation between the knower and the known. The object of knowledge is not a passive “thing” observed from a distance but is knowable and actually known insofar as it is in act. That is, a being becomes knowable not simply because someone turns their attention toward it, but because it possesses a degree of actuality (self-luminosity) which makes it intrinsically intelligible.

Rahner extends his claim that every being is symbolic by nature to the process of knowing, arguing that a being is knowable precisely because it is already symbolic in itself and therefore symbolic for another. A being can be known precisely because it is both ontologically and ontically symbolic in itself and for itself, and therefore symbolic for another.<sup>605</sup> In its most ontological and transcendental sense, a symbol is the inner self-expression of a being that makes knowledge of that being possible by another.<sup>606</sup> Rahner states:

A being can be and is known, in so far as it is itself ontically (in itself) symbolic because it is ontologically (for itself) symbolic. What then is the primordial meaning of symbol and symbolic, according to which each being is in itself and for itself symbolic, and hence (and to this extent) symbolic for another? It is this: as a being realizes itself in its own intrinsic ‘otherness’ (which is constitutive of its being), retentive of its intrinsic plurality (which is contained in its self-realization) as its derivative and hence congruous expression, it makes itself known. ... The being is known in this symbol, without which it cannot be known at all: thus it is symbol in the original (transcendental) sense of the word.<sup>607</sup>

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605. See Rahner, “The Theology of the Symbol,” 230–31.

606. Cf. Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology*, trans. J. Matthew Ashley (New York: Crossroad, 1980), 109–20; *idem*, *Poverty of Spirit*, trans. John Drury (New York: Paulist Press, 1968); and *idem*, “The Future of Faith and Theology after Auschwitz,” in *A Passion for God: The Mystical-Political Dimension of Christianity*, ed. and trans. J. Matthew Ashley (New York: Paulist Press, 1998), 77–88. In Metz’s (1928–2019) view, Rahner’s focus on the individual as a transcendental subject fails to grapple adequately with the concrete catastrophes of history—such as Auschwitz, poverty, oppression, and racism—and the threat they pose to human community. Accordingly, Metz judges Rahner’s anthropological starting point (“knowledge” as “being”) to be an *idealistic abstraction* detached from communal and political experience. For Metz, theology should not begin with “being” understood as abstract historicity, but with the human person embedded in concrete social and political contexts (*Mitwelt*). He further argues that Rahner’s transcendental project places disproportionate emphasis on the “salvation of the individual person,” an oversight that risks reducing the “salvation of the world” to something merely private and apolitical.

607. Rahner, “Zur Theologie des Symbols,” 432; “The Theology of the Symbol,” 230–31.

A being is knowable by others because it is already symbolic in itself—it expresses itself through an inner plurality that remains in harmony with its inner essence. This symbolic structure is not just how others perceive the being, but how the being exists and realizes itself from within. Since a being expresses its essence through a derivative plural form of “otherness,” its inner unity also becomes accessible to others through its exterior plural form.

Rahner draws on the metaphysical tradition from Greek philosophy through scholasticism to argue that the essence of a being attains its full actuality only in its visible, embodied form, which he identifies as its real symbol. Engaging familiar terms from ancient Greek thought through the scholastic tradition—particularly *eidōs* (the intelligible form) and *morphe* (the visible or actualized form)—he argues that original unity within a being is a unity between its intrinsic essence and its outward, visible and intelligible form in the world.<sup>608</sup> In this unity, the “essence” of a material being (*essentia* or “nature”), attains its full actuality only in the projection of its form—its “visible figure” or concrete bodily expression in the world:

It could be shown that the two extremes of this extension, the manifest, visible ‘figure’ on the one hand (*eidōs* and *morphe* together), and the ‘essence’ which gives rise to the figure on the other hand, make up together the full sense of one concept. For how does the figure-forming essence of a being (material, to start with) constitute and perfect itself? It does so by really projecting its visible figure outside itself as its – symbol, its appearance, which allows it to be there, which brings it out to existence in the world.<sup>609</sup>

A being’s essence is not something concealed behind its appearance but is fulfilled precisely in becoming visible. Drawing on the well-established metaphysical unity of matter (*materia prima*) and form, Rahner demonstrates that the inner essence of a being and its visible figure are not two separate realities but two inseparable dimensions of a single unified substance.<sup>610</sup>

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608. See Rahner, “The Theology of the Symbol,” 231.

609. Rahner, “Zur Theologie des Symbols,” 432; “The Theology of the Symbol,” 231.

610. See also Rahner, *Geist in Welt*, 69–70; *Spirit in the World*, 364–365.

The essence of a material being does not remain hidden behind its appearance, as though it were a separate, immaterial reality. Rather, essence attains its full actuality in the projection of its form, which Rahner calls the being's visible figure, bodily presence, or real symbol.

For Rahner, the form of a being—its visible figure or bodily appearance—is not a merely external attribute but the real symbol in which its essence becomes ontologically present for itself and ontically knowable to others. Form is thus not extrinsic to essence; rather, it is the very mode in which essence actualizes itself as presence, both inwardly and outwardly. In its bodily appearance, a being expresses itself and makes the whole of its reality “be there” in the world. Consequently, being possesses itself in the “other,” that is, in the concrete visibility through which it manifests itself in history. In short, essence becomes real and communicable only through form, and form is the real symbol by which essence is disclosed and encountered concretely in the world.<sup>611</sup> This visible essential form—constituted as a unity of soul and primary matter—is the human person as an embodied historical subject, the locus which Rahner identifies as the proper subject matter of transcendental anthropology.<sup>612</sup>

Rahner appropriates the Thomistic distinction between efficient and formal causality to show how symbolic reality expresses itself in bodiliness. He observes that, in St. Thomas' thought, not all perfections involved in a being's embodied self-realization can be attributed

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611. See Rahner, “The Theology of the Symbol,” 231.

612. Rahner confirmed in an interview on the occasion of his seventieth birthday that “transcendental anthropology” is the correct characterization of his entire theology. For Rahner, transcendental anthropology studies the *a priori* conditions inherent in human nature that make knowledge of God's self-communication possible. It conceives the human person as an original unity of spirit and matter, an embodied spirit-in-world, a transcendental subject whose openness, freedom, and historicity constitute the very ground for receiving divine revelation. The concreteness of this transcendental subject finds its fullest expression in human bodiliness, which is the real symbol of the whole person. Rahner's affirmation that theology is essentially a theology of symbol thus corroborates the view that transcendental anthropology is, at its core, a theology of embodied symbolism. For an alternative discussion on Rahner's transcendental anthropology, see Anton Losinger, *The Anthropological Turn: The Human Orientation of the Theology of Karl Rahner*, trans. Daniel O. Dahlstrom (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 54–77.

to efficient causality—that is, to a process in which one agent externally produces change in another. Rather, Thomas acknowledges a broader conception of causality, such as formal cause (*causa formalis*), which operates in a more interior and constitutive manner in the human person. In this mode, a being’s perfection is not imposed from without but emerges from within, as its form expresses the intelligibility and presence of its essence in the world.<sup>613</sup>

The notion of symbol finds its precise meaning in formal causality, wherein form realizes itself in matter such that the visible, material reality is nothing other than the embodied self-expression of the essence. The form of a thing does not act externally to produce an effect distinct from itself. Rather, it gives itself to matter, becoming the act that informs and actualizes the material cause. In this view, the form is not something imposed from without, but is present in what it actualizes—so that the “effect” is nothing other than the form itself, now realized in and through matter.<sup>614</sup> This mode of formal causality, rooted in material bodiliness, reveals the form as the inner structure of the reality itself.<sup>615</sup> This, for Rahner, is the precise meaning of “symbol.” The external, material reality of a being is not something added onto its essence, but is the symbolic expression of the essence, brought forth by the form itself in the concrete act of its self-expression in space and time. In this self-expression, the substantial form remains present in its external bodily manifestation as a real symbol (*Realsymbol*)—a concrete, embodied presence of the essence in and through an “other.”<sup>616</sup> In this sense, a symbol is not a secondary or metaphorical presence, but the

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613. See Rahner, “The Theology of the Symbol,” 232.

614. See Rahner, “The Theology of the Symbol,” 232.

615. Rahner puts it thus: “In this differentiated ‘symbol’ that which is symbolized is present, the form itself (creating the ‘ontological-symbolic’ difference between symbolic reality and symbolic representation), since it brings about the ‘other’ which it forms, inasmuch as it imparts to it the reality which the form itself has” (Rahner, “The Theology of the Symbol,” 232).

616. See Rahner, “The Theology of the Symbol,” 232–33.

actualization and visible presence of the being's inner essence, made present in the "otherness" of its bodily form.

In Rahner's symbolic ontology, therefore, a symbol is not an external addition to a being, but the necessary manner of its concrete self-expression, culminating in the being's essential realization in and through its bodily form. In this view, the symbol is not something imposed from outside or added secondarily to an already complete essence. Rather, it is the essential mode by which a being becomes visible, tangible, and made present through and in its form. Symbolic reality thus arises wherever a being expresses and realizes itself in its form as a constitutive aspect of its own inner essence and perfection. Rahner identifies this deeper understanding of the symbol with the scholastic doctrine that "the soul is the form of the body."<sup>617</sup> According to this doctrine, the human body is not merely an instrument or outer covering of the soul, but its historical, visible, and material self-expression—a real symbol (*Realsymbol*) of the whole person in their deepest unity of matter and spirit.

## 8.2. Bodiliness (*Leiblichkeit*) as Real Symbol

This section presents Rahner's theology of symbolic reality as it culminates in a vision of human bodiliness (*Leiblichkeit*) as the concrete symbol through which both the divine and the human become historically present in the world. Far from treating symbols as mere signs or analogical representations, Rahner identifies bodiliness as the real symbol (*Realsymbol*)—the material expression of a being's essential structure in space and time. Within this symbolic structure, Christ's humanity, the Church's sacraments, and the human body are revealed as dynamic, historical expressions of the reality they symbolize, made manifest through concrete bodiliness. The section develops the following themes: (1) the humanity of Christ as

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617. See Rahner, "The Theology of the Symbol," 234.

the symbol of the Father; (2) the sacraments as symbolic forms of grace; and (3) the body as the symbol of the total human person.

### 8.2.1. The Humanity of Christ as the Symbol of the Father

Rahner situates the doctrine of the Incarnation at the centre of his theology of symbol, since Jesus of Nazareth is the definitive self-expression of the Father.<sup>618</sup> In his theology of symbol, the humanity of Christ holds central importance. Any theology of symbolic reality must place the humanity of Christ (the Incarnation) at its centre. This is because the Incarnation is the highest expression of the symbolic reality, where human bodiliness stands as a *Realsymbol* of divine presence. Jesus' statement, "He who has seen me has seen the Father" (Jn 14:9), encapsulates the symbolic meaning of his humanity. The Incarnate Logos is not merely a reflection or image of God in an abstract sense, but the real, historical presence of God in the world, filled with the fullness of divine life.<sup>619</sup> In Jesus of Nazareth, God is revealed as what God freely chooses to become in the world—irreversibly human and permanently embodied. In this sense, Jesus of Nazareth is the absolute symbol of God in history, the concrete and unsurpassable self-expression of God's essence in human form.<sup>620</sup>

Rahner cautions that the traditional formulation of the doctrine of the Incarnation—namely, that the Logos assumed a human nature—requires deeper interpretation to express the full depth of its symbolic meaning. If Christ's humanity is conceived merely as a static nature passively born by the divine Logos, and if it is understood in the same way as ordinary human nature—as being simply "in the image and likeness of God"—then the Incarnation risks being misinterpreted.<sup>621</sup> In such a view, Christ's humanity becomes something like a

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618. See also Gerald A. McCool, "Rahner's Anthropology," *America*, October 31, 1970, 344.

619. See Rahner, "The Theology of the Symbol," 237.

620. See Rahner, "The Theology of the Symbol," 237.

621. See Rahner, "The Theology of the Symbol," 237.

sign, an instrument, or an outer garment—a human nature used by the Logos rather than a reality that is itself the self-expression of the divine Logos. Rahner argues that this interpretation falls short of the Incarnation’s symbolic depth and must be overcome if Christ’s humanity is to be understood as the real symbol (*Realsymbol*) of God’s self-communication in history. He states:

If we simply say: the Logos took on a human nature ... the full sense of the symbolic reality, which the humanity of the Logos [*Menschheit des Logos*] represents with regard to the Logos, is given no clear expression. For if the humanity which is assumed is considered only as that well-known reality which we know in ourselves, and which is only very generally ‘image and likeness’ of God; and if this humanity is supposed only to subsist in a static, ontic sense, that is, as ‘borne’ and ‘taken on’ by the Logos: then the humanity has no doubt the function of a signal or a uniform with regard to the Logos, but not in full truth the function of such a symbol as we have developed above.<sup>622</sup>

In this deficient interpretation, Christ’s humanity functions more as an external instrument than as the true self-expression of the Logos. The humanity of Jesus is seen as a mere signal or tool, arbitrarily selected from among many possibilities, and not truly belonging to the Logos in a way that is essential and expressive of who he is. For Rahner, even if the hypostatic union is affirmed as the real and substantial union of divine and human natures—though the Incarnation itself makes no such explicit ontological claim—this view still severs the symbolic link between sign and reality.<sup>623</sup> Christ’s humanity becomes merely a vehicle, something the Logos uses to act or speak, rather than the actual medium of revelation itself; it is analogous to a vocal organ through which the Logos communicates, but not the speech itself. In this view, Christ’s humanity reveals only by enabling divine action, not by being the revelation in-itself.<sup>624</sup>

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622. Rahner, “Zur Theologie des Symbols,” 438; “The Theology of the Symbol,” 237.

623. See Rahner, “The Theology of the Symbol,” 237.

624. See Rahner, “The Theology of the Symbol,” 237–38.

Such a reductive interpretation of Christ's humanity results in a deficient Christology in which Jesus reveals the Father primarily through his words and moral actions, rather than through the concrete symbolic significance of his human nature. Accordingly, Rahner holds that the humanity of Christ would not express the Logos as a symbol in the proper sense, but merely serves it, functioning as an instrument rather than as the self-expression of Godself.<sup>625</sup> Against this view, Rahner insists that the Logos is, in his humanity, the revelatory symbol through which God expresses and gives Godself to the world, not merely metaphorically or illustratively, but in the deepest ontological sense:

The humanity of Christ is not to be considered as something in which God dresses up and masquerades – a mere signal of which he makes use, so that something audible can be uttered about the Logos by means of this signal. The humanity is the self-disclosure of the Logos itself, so that when God, expressing himself, exteriorizes himself, that very thing appears which we call the humanity of the Logos. Thus anthropology itself is finally based on ... the doctrine about God himself, in so far as it depicts that which 'appears' when in his self-exteriorization he goes out of himself into that which is other than he.<sup>626</sup>

Christ's humanity is not merely a symbolic disguise or external vessel used by God to communicate Godself to the world. Instead, the humanity of Jesus is the real symbolic self-expression of the Logos. In becoming human, the eternal Logos does not merely appear in human form but is revealed to the world through that humanity. In this way, anthropology is grounded in Christology itself, since Christ's humanity is the definitive manifestation of God's self-communication.<sup>627</sup> Christ's humanity, in its historical, bodily concreteness (*Leiblichkeit*), makes present the perfect divine reality it reveals: "The Logos, as Word of the

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625. See Rahner, "The Theology of the Symbol," 238–39.

626. Rahner, "Zur Theologie des Symbols," 438–39; "The Theology of the Symbol," 239.

627. See Rahner, "The Theology of the Symbol," 239. Harvey D. Egan succinctly captures this connection between Rahner's theological anthropology and concrete human experience: "Given the reciprocal relationship between grace and the human person, Rahner's theology is essentially anthropology; his anthropology, theocentric. Therefore, any Christian truth is simultaneously a truth of both human consciousness and experience" (Harvey D. Egan, "Theology and Spirituality," in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Rahner*, ed. Declan Marmion and Mary E. Hines [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005], 16).

Father, expresses the Father in the ‘abbreviation’ of his human nature and constitutes the symbol which communicates him to the world.”<sup>628</sup>

### 8.2.2. Sacraments as Symbolic Forms of Grace

Rahner turns to the sacraments of the Church, identifying them as privileged loci in which the Church’s symbolic nature is most clearly expressed as the concrete universal sign of the real presence of grace in the world. He argues that the sacraments make personal and tangible the symbolic reality of the Church itself, which he calls the “primary sacrament” (*Grundsakrament*) of grace.<sup>629</sup> In keeping with the Church’s own symbolic structure, the sacraments are rightly understood as sacred signs of God’s grace—that is, symbols in the proper theological sense, where sign and reality are ontologically united. For Rahner, these formulations express a proper symbolic ontology of grace in which the sacramental symbol not only points to grace but makes it present in itself: “*sacramenta efficiunt quod significant*” [the sacraments effect what they signify] and “*sacramenta significant gratiam quia eam efficiunt*” [they signify grace because they effect it].<sup>630</sup> In this sacramental structure, Rahner sees the clearest ecclesial affirmation of *Realsymbol*—where symbol and what it signifies are not merely extrinsically related but internally and dynamically united.

Rahner argues that the efficacy of the sacraments arises from the very nature of symbol itself, wherein sign and what is signified are intrinsically united in a single sacramental reality. The sacraments, therefore, are not arbitrary rituals or external gestures that God merely uses to confer grace; they are symbolic realities in which grace itself becomes present and effective in the world.<sup>631</sup> As grace permeates the spatio-temporal

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628. Rahner, “The Theology of the Symbol,” 240.

629. See Rahner, “The Theology of the Symbol,” 241.

630. Rahner, “The Theology of the Symbol,” 241–42.

631. See Rahner, “The Theology of the Symbol,” 241–42.

dimension of human existence, it necessarily takes on a sacramental form. In this structure, the symbolic sign we call “sacrament” is not simply a pointer to grace but is constituted by the grace it makes present. The sacrament is the cause of grace precisely because it is its sign, and it is a sign precisely because grace effects it:

As God’s work of grace on man is accomplished (incarnates itself), it enters the spatio-temporal historicity of man as sacrament, and as it does so, it becomes active with regard to man, it constitutes itself. For as soon *as* one sees the sacraments as the action of *God* on man ... it is no longer possible to ask whether this sign produces grace by ‘physical’ or ‘moral’ causality. For at no stage can the sign be seen apart from what is signified, since it is understood *a priori* as a symbolic reality, which the signified itself brings about in order to be really present itself. But we can on the other hand see that the sacrament is precisely ‘cause’ of grace, *in so far* as it is its ‘sign’ and that the grace – seen as coming from God – is the cause of the sign, bringing it about and so alone making itself present.<sup>632</sup>

The sacraments are not external rituals arbitrarily employed by God, but the concrete, spatio-temporal form through which God’s grace becomes historically present and efficacious in the world. As grace “incarnates” itself in human historicity (*Leiblichkeit*), it necessarily assumes a sacramental form. The sacrament is the cause of grace because it is its concrete sign, and it is the sign precisely because grace causes itself through it. In this symbolic structure, sign and what is signified are inseparable: the sacrament is a symbolic reality that causes grace, and grace is made present through the sign that expresses it.<sup>633</sup>

Rahner maintains that the sacramental structure of the Church corresponds to its concrete, juridical, and historical reality as the visible embodiment of divine grace in the world.<sup>634</sup> Just as the Church is the visible, juridical symbol of God’s enduring presence in

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632. Rahner, “Zur Theologie des Symbols,” 448; “The Theology of the Symbol,” 242.

633. This understanding is relevant to any theological debate over whether sacraments operate by “physical” or “moral” causality, because it no longer treats the sign and the reality as distinct, externally related entities. Instead, the sacrament is grace in its historical-symbolic form; grace that expresses and communicates itself through the very sign it brings into being as its own manifestation.

634. See Rahner, “The Theology of the Symbol,” 242.

history, so too are the sacraments juridically ordered expressions of that same self-communication, mediated in and through the Church's concrete form.<sup>635</sup> This sacramental understanding of the Church, Rahner contends, finds its fullest expression in the symbolic character of the human person, whose bodily existence in the world expresses the interior dynamics of the self and the existential freedom of the person: "The free acceptance by the spirit of man is also a totally human act, which is therefore also a bodily one and hence also takes place in the symbol; and so the act is also historical and social and hence also 'ecclesial'."<sup>636</sup> Only by beginning from this anthropological foundation—the body as the symbol of the total person, revealing both interior spiritual freedom and outward material presence—can we rightly understand the sacraments in the Church as the symbolic embodiment of the inner Spirit of God, unfolding in salvation history as a dialogue between divine love and human freedom.<sup>637</sup>

### 8.2.2. The Body as the Symbol of the Total Person

Returning to the context of devotion to the Sacred Heart, Rahner concludes his discussion of symbolic reality with a focused reflection on the body as the symbolic expression of the total human person. This final reflection, he notes, is essential, since the theology of symbol is meant to provide a foundation for a more profound theological understanding of devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus.<sup>638</sup> Rahner clarifies, however, that this discussion does not seek to resolve specific theological or dogmatic questions concerning the "heart of Christ" or its direct relation to divine love. Rather, it addresses the precise symbolic

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635. For an alternative critical interpretation, see Bert van der Heijden, *Karl Rahner: Darstellung und Kritik seiner Grundpositionen* (Einsiedeln: Johannes-Verlag, 1973), 367–386.

636. See Rahner, "The Theology of the Symbol," 246.

637. See Rahner, "The Theology of the Symbol," 242–243.

638. See Rahner, "The Theology of the Symbol," 246.

meaning of the term “heart” within the context of the devotion to the Sacred Heart.<sup>639</sup> While Rahner does not treat the devotion itself in detail within this context, he acknowledges that his theology of symbolic reality is intended as a preparatory framework for a proper interpretation of the devotion. Precisely because the heart is a real symbol of human life, he finds it appropriate to offer a more concrete account of the body as the real symbol of the total human person.<sup>640</sup>

Rahner grounds his account of the body as the symbol of the total person in the Thomistic doctrine that “the soul is the substantial form of the body.”<sup>641</sup> This metaphysical starting point clarifies what is meant by “body”: it is not an independently existing substance to which the soul is merely added, but derives its actual being, its form, and reality from its original unity with the soul: “For if we ascribe to the body an actual being, a positive content, which is prior to the reality of the soul, it would be impossible to see why this bodily entity should be still the expression and so the symbol of the soul.”<sup>642</sup> In other words, the body receives its ontological form and symbolic function precisely through its substantial unity with the soul. If the body possessed an independent reality prior to or apart from the soul, it could not authentically serve as the expression or symbol of the soul. Only because the body’s reality is constituted by its union with the soul can it fully symbolize and manifest the inner, spiritual dimension and essence of the human person.<sup>643</sup>

Building on Thomistic presuppositions, Rahner argues that the body is not a separate entity alongside the soul, but the soul’s self-realization in matter, rendering the soul

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639. See Rahner, “The Theology of the Symbol,” 246.

640. See Rahner, “The Theology of the Symbol,” 246.

641. See Rahner, “The Theology of the Symbol,” 234.

642. Rahner, “The Theology of the Symbol,” 246.

643. See Rahner, “The Theology of the Symbol,” 246–47.

symbolically present in the world in and through human bodiliness. According to the clear teaching of St. Thomas, Rahner claims, the human person is not composed of a soul and a fully formed body, but of a soul and prime matter (*materia prima*).<sup>644</sup> Prime matter is not material in the ordinary sense but pure potentiality, devoid of form or actuality on its own. It becomes a living human body only through the informing action of the soul, which imparts its own actuality to this passive potency, called prime matter:

But man, strictly speaking, according to the clear doctrine of Thomism, is not composed of a soul and a body, but of a soul and *materia prima*. And this matter is of itself the strictly potential substratum of the substantial self-realization of the ‘*anima*’ (which is its ‘in formation’ in the metaphysical sense), which by imparting itself thus gives its reality to the passive possibility of *materia prima*, so that anything that is act (and reality) in this potentiality is precisely the soul. It follows at once that what we call body is nothing else than the actuality of the soul itself in the ‘other’ of *materia prima*, the ‘otherness’ produced by the soul itself, and hence its expression and symbol in the very sense which we have given to the term symbolic reality.<sup>645</sup>

The body is not something externally or accidentally added to the soul, but the soul’s historical manifestation in the “otherness” of matter—its symbolic embodied presence in space and time. In Rahner’s theology of symbolic reality, the body is the real symbol of the soul and the very mode through which the soul becomes visible, tangible, and historically present in the world. Though bodily existence unfolds in plurally differentiated and multiple dimensions, these dimensions are essentially unified through the soul, as the substantial form of the body. As Rahner puts it: “the body is the symbol of the soul, inasmuch as it is formed as the self-realization of the soul ... and the soul renders itself present and makes its ‘appearance’ in the body which is distinct from it.”<sup>646</sup>

Ultimately, Rahner identifies bodiliness (*Leiblichkeit*) as the fundamental symbol

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644. See Rahner, “The Theology of the Symbol,” 247.

645. Rahner, “Zur Theologie des Symbols,” 452; “The Theology of the Symbol,” 247.

646. Rahner, “The Theology of the Symbol,” 247.

through which every reality, human and divine, material and spiritual, expresses itself concretely in space and time: the Trinity through the bodily Incarnation of Christ; divine grace through the concrete bodiliness of the Church and sacraments; and the soul through a human body.<sup>647</sup> This insight is foundational for all theological reflection: spirituality, anthropology, Christology, ecclesiology, sacraments, and eschatology. As Rahner emphatically concludes, “the whole of theology is incomprehensible if it is not essentially a theology of bodily symbols.”<sup>648</sup>

To sum, Rahner’s ontology of symbol establishes bodiliness (*Leiblichkeit*) as the primary medium through which reality discloses itself. Against reductive accounts that treat symbols as external signs or arbitrary codes, he insists that every being is symbolic by nature, expressing its unity through a plurality that perfects rather than compromises it. Through the symbol, the inner essence of a reality becomes present in its concrete bodily form.

This symbolic structure provides the basis for Rahner’s transcendental anthropology. The human person is not a soul inhabiting a body but a unity in which the body is the *Realsymbol* of the soul—the concrete and historical self-expression of the person’s spiritual essence. Human existence is thus irreducibly bodily: the body is not accidental to personhood but constitutive of it, the very locus where the human spirit becomes visible, active, and relational within history.<sup>649</sup> From this anthropological foundation, Rahner extends the ontology of symbol to Christology and sacramental theology. In the Incarnation, the humanity of Christ is not an external instrument but the definitive and irreversible symbol of

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647. Cf. Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 19–57. Marion (b. 1946) develops a phenomenology of givenness in which the “icon,” distinguished from mere idol or image, serves as a privileged site of divine self-manifestation, though not identical with the reality of the manifestation itself. In this work, he seeks to move theology beyond metaphysics, arguing that revelation is disclosed through “excess”—the overflowing gratuity of givenness—rather than through ontological categories or *a priori* symbolic structures.

648. Rahner, “The Theology of the Symbol,” 235.

649. See also Munteanu, “Karl Rahners Theologie der Leiblichkeit,” 61.

the Logos. The sacraments, likewise, are not mere ritual signs arbitrarily employed by the Church to mediate God's grace but the historical and bodily forms through which grace itself becomes concretely present in the world. Theology, in Rahner's vision, is therefore always and essentially a theology of embodied symbols. In this light, anthropology emerges as the decisive bridge and ground of Rahner's wider existential theology: His Christology, ecclesiology, spiritual theology, and eschatology is more precise when read in relation to bodiliness, as *Realsymbol*. This chapter, therefore, demonstrates that *Leiblichkeit* is the fundamental category for interpreting Rahner's theological enterprise as a theology of symbolic reality.

## Chapter 9

### **Bodiliness and Ecclesiology: The Church as Concrete Sacrament of Grace**

In Catholic theology, the Church has often been described either as a spiritual community of believers or as a juridical and spiritual institution defined by its hierarchical and sacramental structures. Rahner rejects both understandings of the Church as reductive. For him, the Church must be understood in its historical embeddedness as the concrete sacramental symbol of God's presence and love in the world. This chapter explores Rahner's ecclesiology in relation to *Leiblichkeit*, showing how the concrete, juridical, and sacramental form of the Church in the world constitutes its theological identity as the Body of Christ.

Grounded in Rahner's interpretation of the encyclical *Mystici Corporis Christi* (1943), the chapter develops two interrelated claims. First, it examines the Church's visible structures, highlighting how sacramental incorporation and juridical adherence to the Church's doctrines are essential to full ecclesial belonging or membership. The Church is not an abstract spiritual institution but a concrete sacramental community of human members, mediating God's grace in history through evangelical witness and discipleship. Second, it explores the paradox of the Church as both sinful and holy, demonstrating how the holiness of the Church is visibly embodied in the saints, while sin arises from its fallible members.

By articulating the Church as the Primordial or Proto-Sacrament of grace in the world (*Grundsakrament*), Rahner presents its visible, bodily, and historical form as the enduring presence of God's grace in history. Ecclesiology, in this light, must be approached through the category of *Leiblichkeit*: the Church is a bodily, historical community in which God's love and grace become concretely present in the world and through which humanity is incorporated into God's own divine life.

## 9.1. The Nature of the Church

This section examines Rahner's theological interpretation of the Church in light of the encyclical letter *Mystici Corporis Christi*, with particular attention to the role of bodiliness (*Leiblichkeit*) in defining ecclesial membership and identity. Against views that reduce the Church to either a purely spiritual community or a merely juridical institution, Rahner argues that the Church is the embodied and visible sacrament of God's grace in history, composed of concrete human members. For him, belonging to the Church entails participation in its visible, juridical, and sacramental structure, through which grace is mediated and historically made present in the world. This discussion will explore the following themes: (1) membership and visible nature of the Church in the world, and (2) the Church as the concrete sacrament of grace.

### 9.1.1. Membership and the Visible Nature of the Church

In "Die Gliedschaft in der Kirche nach der Lehre der Enzyklika Pius' XII. *Mystici Corporis Christi*" (1947), Rahner reflects on Church membership acknowledging the conceptual ambiguity that surrounds its understanding in Catholic theology.<sup>650</sup> While membership in the Church has not been clearly and definitively defined in any official dogma, he argues that it can nonetheless be approached theologically through the Church's doctrinal pronouncements.<sup>651</sup> For Rahner, the Church in question is not an abstract ideal or spiritual community of believers, but "the Roman Catholic Church, which knows itself to be

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650. See Karl Rahner, "Die Gliedschaft in der Kirche nach der Lehre der Enzyklika Pius' XII. *Mystici Corporis Christi*," in *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 10, *Kirche in den Herausforderungen der Zeit: Studien zur Ekklesiologie und zur kirchlichen Existenz*, ed. Josef Heinzlitz and Albert Raffelt (Freiburg: Verlag Herder, 2003), 3–71; "Membership of the Church According to the Teaching of Pius XII's Encyclical *Mystici Corporis Christi*," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 2, *Man in the Church II*, trans. Karl-H. Kruger, O.F.M. (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1963), 1–88.

651. See Rahner, "Membership of the Church," 4–5.

founded by Christ, even as an external, visibly organized society with the Bishop of Rome at its head, and which, as such, declares itself to be basically necessary for salvation.”<sup>652</sup> This understanding highlights that the Church is fundamentally a visible and historical institution composed of human members under a human leader, the Bishop of Rome.<sup>653</sup>

The concrete visibility of the Church is further clarified in the encyclical letter *Mystici Corporis Christi*, which defines the Church as a juridical and sacramental society structured by two essential forms of power: the power of jurisdiction (*potestas iurisdictionis*) and the power of orders (*potestas ordinis*).<sup>654</sup> Based on this, Rahner maintains that full membership in the Church involves formal union through both juridical adherence to Church teaching and sacramental incorporation through baptism.<sup>655</sup> Accordingly, to belong to the Church in the fullest sense is to participate concretely in its visible sacramental structure. Membership, therefore, is not reducible to an internal spiritual disposition or private regard for the Church; rather, it is defined by active participation in the Church’s juridical and sacramental life. This external visibility, for Rahner, is not secondary but constitutive of what the Church is.<sup>656</sup> To

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652. See Rahner, “Membership of the Church,” 5.

653. In *Grundkurs des Glaubens* (1976), Rahner reiterates the understanding of the Church as a community composed of concrete human beings: “Wherever there are human beings there is ‘church’ in the sense of a religious organization. ... When we say that Christianity must be constituted as church, we mean that this ecclesial community belongs to the religious existence of man as such, quite independently of the question how it must be constituted more precisely in the concrete. It is part of man’s question about salvation and it is fundamentally co-constitutive of his relationship to God” (Karl Rahner, *Grundkurs des Glaubens: Einführung in den Begriff des Christentums*, in *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 26, *Grundkurs des Glaubens: Studien zum Begriff des Christentums*, ed. Nikolaus Schwerdtfeger and Albert Raffelt [Freiburg: Verlag Herder, 1999], 324; *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 342). This, however, does not exclude other possible ways of defining the Church, even theologically. As Rahner affirms, in considering the Church as a concrete, visible society on earth, “we do not mean to deny by this that the word ‘Church’ could of itself have also a wider sense; indeed the history of the proclamation of the Faith, and of Theology, shows that it has in fact had this wider sense as well” (see Rahner, “Membership of the Church,” 5). His emphasis is that, alongside theological understandings of the Church—such as the infallible herald of the truths of the faith, a visible and invisible society, the mystical body of Christ, and so on—there is first of all a basic understanding of the Church as a concrete, visible society, made up and headed by human beings who have their own strengths, faults, and failings.

654. See Rahner, “Membership of the Church,” 6–7.

655. For further discussion, see Richard Lennan, *The Ecclesiology of Karl Rahner* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995; repr., 1997), 16–21.

656. See Rahner, “Membership of the Church,” 7.

reinforce this point, Rahner draws a parallel between the Church and the sacraments, emphasising that both are defined first and foremost by their concrete, tangible form. He writes:

Like the notion of ‘Sacrament’, the term ‘Church’ refers in ecclesiastical usage directly to the external, visible and legally structured community of believers. It refers only indirectly to men’s inner faith and union with Christ by grace, in so far, namely, as these, both as signs and as tangible realities, are effected and become present in this world through the visible Church.<sup>657</sup>

In the Church’s official language, the term “Church” refers primarily to the visible, juridically ordered community of believers. Spiritual union with Christ, while vital, is only secondarily relevant in this context, insofar as it becomes real and historically operative through the visible Church. Thus, Rahner insists that full ecclesial belonging must be understood in terms of the concrete, bodily, and historical reality in which the Church exists and functions as the sacramental presence of God’s grace in the world.

To define full ecclesial membership, Rahner emphasizes that one must be visibly and concretely incorporated into the Church through both sacramental and juridical means. If juridical and sacramental power are the two defining features of the Church as a concrete, visible, and organized society of believers, then true membership requires both constitutional incorporation through baptism (*Die Gliedschaft in der Kirche*) and operational adherence through personal fidelity to the Church’s faith and communion (*Die Zugehörigkeit zur Kirche*). Put differently, membership entails not only the reception of the sacrament of baptism but also ongoing active participation in the Church’s doctrinal life and hierarchical communion. From this logic, it follows—in the negative sense—that the unbaptized, as well as those who, though baptized, have separated themselves from the Church through heresy or schism, cannot be considered full members of the Church. Rahner affirms that this is the

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<sup>657</sup>. Rahner, “Die Gliedschaft in der Kirche,” 15; “Membership of the Church,” 16.

clear teaching of *Mystici Corporis Christi*:

The Encyclical positively determines to begin with who belongs to the Church as a member ... Only he is a member of the Church (*Ecclesiae membrum*) who firstly has received baptism, secondly professes the true Faith (*veram fidem profiteri*) and thirdly, has neither severed himself from the bond of the corporate ecclesiastical body (*corporis compago*) nor has been separated from it by the ecclesiastical authority. From this it follows, in the negative sense, that the unbaptized and those who have set themselves in opposition to the Church through a profession of faith different from the Faith of the Church or through a radical rejection of the authority of the Church (*fide vel regimine dividi*), are no longer members of the Church.<sup>658</sup>

Full membership in the Church demands both sacramental incorporation and personal adherence to its teaching and hierarchical unity. This includes the formal profession of the true faith and the maintenance of visible communion with the Church's juridical structure. Those who fall outside this dual requirement—whether through lack of baptism or separation from ecclesial authority—are not counted among its full members. In this view, Church membership is not a matter of private belief or an invisible spiritual union with God; it is a concrete, bodily belonging, involving actual human persons who actively participate in the Church's institutional and sacramental life.<sup>659</sup>

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658. Rahner, "Die Gliedschaft in der Kirche," 23–24; "Membership of the Church," 27.

659. While Rahner admits that full membership in the Church requires both constitutional (*Gliedschaft*) and operational (*Zugehörigkeit*) membership, it should be clear that he does not equate the question of membership in the Church with that of salvation. For Rahner, full membership in the Church is not a *conditio sine qua non* for salvation. In "Anonymes Christentum und Missionsauftrag der Kirche," (1970), he examines how the theological concept of "anonymous Christianity" complements the Church's evangelical mission, responding to concerns that this framework—which acknowledges God's grace acting outside explicit faith in Christ or visible Church membership—sheds more light on Vatican II's theology of the possibility of salvation for non-members of the Church. Anonymous Christianity recognises that individuals who sincerely follow their conscience and seek truth participate in sanctifying grace, even without explicit knowledge of Christ. This grace represents a real yet incomplete orientation toward salvation, inherently drawing individuals toward explicit faith and communion with the Church. Rahner emphasizes that missionary work actualizes this implicit relationship with God, bringing it to its fullest expression in explicit Christianity and ecclesial life. Rahner redefines the Church's missionary task as an act of love aimed at enabling individuals and communities to experience the fullness of grace through the sacraments and active participation in the Church. In this sense, the Church's evangelising task is not merely about rescuing humanity from eternal damnation but about revealing and elevating the incarnational dynamism of grace, allowing it to manifest fully in human lives and cultures. Rahner situates this task within the universal scope of Christ's redemption, framing it as a transformative endeavour that engages individuals and societies alike. Integrating anonymous Christianity into the theology of mission, Rahner further explains that evangelization is a collaborative process between God, the Church, and the world, rooted in divine love and the human longing for ultimate fulfilment. This perspective not

Rahner underscores that *Mystici Corporis Christi* presents the Church in unmistakably concrete and bodily terms, identifying it not as an abstract spiritual entity but as a *corporis compage*—a “corporate ecclesiastical body.”<sup>660</sup> This visible, juridically structured community is not merely a sociological organization but the very subject of the Church’s theological identity. Rahner distinguishes between this juridical description and the theological term *corpus Christi mysticum*, the mystical body of Christ.<sup>661</sup> Yet he notes that the encyclical uses these terms synonymously.<sup>662</sup> In highlighting this identification, he draws attention to the encyclical’s consistent position that the visible, historical Church is the subject of the mystical body:

It will not be necessary to regard this terminological identification by the Encyclical of ‘Church’ and ‘*corpus mysticum*’ as theologically obligatory in such a way that it would, in principle, no longer be permissible to use the term ‘*corpus Christi mysticum*’ in a terminologically wider sense. ... Even when making a *terminological* distinction between the two notions, which is ‘*in itself*’ possible, it would at all events have to remain clear that the ‘Mystical Body of Christ and the Roman Catholic Church’ are ‘one and the same thing’, in the sense that one cannot belong to the former if, and in so far as, one does not belong to the latter.<sup>663</sup>

The mystical body of Christ is not to be understood as an invisible or purely spiritual reality distinct from the institutional Church, but as identical with the visible, juridically ordered

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only preserves but enriches the urgency and inclusivity of the Church’s mission, ensuring its outreach remains a hopeful and transformative expression of God’s salvific will, even among those who do not formally belong to it as members. For a further discussion, see Karl Rahner, “Anonymes Christentum und Missionsauftrag der Kirche,” in *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 22/2, *Dogmatik nach dem Konzil: Theologische Anthropologie und Ekklesiologie*, ed. Albert Raffelt (Freiburg: Verlag Herder, 2008), 312–25; “Anonymous Christianity and the Missionary Task of the Church,” in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 12, *Confrontations II*, trans. David Bourke (New York: Seabury Press; London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1974), 161–78. For further discussion on Rahner’s anonymous Christianity, see Bernard Sesboué, *Karl Rahner* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 2001), 98–100, 148–155.

660. Rahner, “Membership of the Church,” 27.

661. See Rahner, “Membership of the Church,” 33.

662. See Rahner, “Membership of the Church,” 65.

663. Rahner, “Die Gliedschaft in der Kirche,” 54–55; “Membership of the Church,” 66.

Church in history. While theoretical distinctions between the terms may be possible, Rahner insists that they cannot obscure the essential point that one cannot belong to the mystical body of Christ without belonging to the concrete, juridical Church. In this view, the Church's historical existence is not incidental to its mystical identity but constitutive of it.<sup>664</sup> The mystical body is precisely this visible Roman Catholic Church, composed of embodied persons united in faith and sacrament, through whom the grace of Christ is made historically present in the world.

### 9.1.2. The Church as Concrete Sacrament of Grace

For Rahner, the Church's identity can only be understood sacramentally: a visible body that both signifies and mediates divine grace in the world.<sup>665</sup> He begins from the established presupposition, already discussed, that the Church is a tangible juridical body, visible and existentially verifiable in the world.<sup>666</sup> From this foundational claim, he observes that *Mystici Corporis Christi* also explicitly cautions against a rationalistic or sociological reduction of the Church of Christ to a merely external or physical reality.<sup>667</sup> Catholic tradition, according to Rahner, affirms that the Church is much more than an administrative body. Founded by Christ and enlivened by the Spirit, it is constituted as the Body of Christ and formed as the Communion of Saints.<sup>668</sup> Essential to its identity are the grace of Christ, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, and the interior union of believers with Christ their head

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664. See also Rahner, *Foundations*, 345–346.

665. Lennan also places sacramentality at the heart of Rahner's ecclesiology. For further discussion, see Richard Lennan, "Ecclesiology and Ecumenism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Rahner*, ed. Declan Marmion and Mary E. Hines (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 129–32.

666. See Rahner, "Membership of the Church," 70.

667. For Rahner, this reductionist view is not new. He points out that Pope Leo XIII had already strongly criticized it in his 1896 encyclical *Satis cognitum*, calling it a form of "ecclesiological Nestorianism"—a separation of the visible and spiritual dimensions of the Church in a way similar to the heretical separation of Christ's humanity and divinity (See Rahner, "Membership of the Church," 70–71).

668. See Rahner, "Membership of the Church," 71.

through a real likeness and assimilation to his life.<sup>669</sup>

To address the tension between juridical incorporation and the Church's deeper theological understanding, Rahner appeals to the sacraments of the Church, distinguishing between their formal validity and their actual efficacy in mediating grace.<sup>670</sup> On the one hand, the formal conditions for Church membership often emphasize juridical incorporation; on the other hand, both Tradition and magisterial teaching reject any view that confines Church membership to a mere legal or sociological belonging. To resolve this tension, Rahner turns to the theology of the sacraments, which he views as a model for understanding the Church's dual character. A sacrament, he argues, is not simply a symbol pointing to an external reality; it is a sign that truly confers the grace it signifies.<sup>671</sup> From this perspective, two distinct but related questions must be carefully distinguished. The first concerns the formal validity of the sacrament—that is, the essential and unchanging conditions that make it a genuine, visible act of grace in the Church. The second addresses the further conditions required for this valid sacramental act to be efficacious in communicating grace to the recipient. In other words, it is possible for a sacrament to be validly celebrated yet fail to bring about the grace it signifies in the individual's life.<sup>672</sup>

Rahner draws two key implications from the distinction between sacramental validity and sacramental efficacy, both of which are essential to a proper theological understanding of the Church. On the one hand, a sacrament can be defined strictly in terms of the conditions required for its valid celebration—that is, by focusing on its external structure, juridical form, and ritual action. On the other hand, the deeper theological meaning of a sacrament also

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669. See Rahner, "Membership of the Church," 71.

670. For an alternative discussion on the sacramentality of the Church, see Lennan, *The Ecclesiology of Karl Rahner*, 24–28.

671. See Rahner, "Membership of the Church," 71.

672. See Rahner, "Membership of the Church," 72.

includes the inner grace it is intended to effect.<sup>673</sup> Rahner insists that these two aspects must be held together: one concerns the visible, legally verifiable sacramental sign; the other pertains to the invisible grace it signifies and communicates.<sup>674</sup> Neither can substitute for the other, and neither should be elevated at the expense of the other. The very possibility of a valid but spiritually ineffective sacrament demonstrates that a real and theologically significant Christian event can occur on the juridical and ritual level without necessarily resulting in the actual interior reception of the intended grace.<sup>675</sup>

Rahner interprets the dialectic of outward sign and inward grace through the analogy

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673. See Rahner, "Membership of the Church," 72. Cf. James J. Buckley, "On Being a Symbol: An Appraisal of Karl Rahner," *Theological Studies* 40, no. 3 (1979): 460, <https://theologicalstudies.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/40.3.2.pdf>. Buckley captures this view in distinguishing between "symbolic representations" (*Vertretungssymbol*) and "real symbols" (*Realsymbol*) in Rahner's theology. *Realsymbol* are not merely signs that point to something else but are realities that actually make present what they signify. In contrast, *Vertretungssymbol* merely represents something without effecting it. This distinction is crucial to understanding Rahner's sacramental theology, particularly his emphasis that sacraments are not just symbolic gestures but real mediations of divine grace.

674. See Rahner, "Membership of the Church," 72.

675. See Rahner, "Membership of the Church," 72–73. In "Was ist ein Sakrament" (1971), Rahner revisits and expands on the theology of sacraments, emphasising their historical and participatory nature in the concrete realities they represent in sacramental signs. Focusing on the Eucharist—as the sacrament of ecclesiastical life—he asserts the active role of the recipient and introduces a "Copernican approach" that views sacraments as dynamic exchanges between concrete human experience and divine grace in the world. Sacraments are the visible culmination of God's grace already present in the world, rooted in the very exercise of human freedom, and made visible in the concretely lived dimension of human experience in the world (*Leiblichkeit*). Thus, the sacraments are not merely symbolic rituals but "real symbols" (*Realsymbol*)—signs that truly effect what they signify in their mediatory role between divine grace and human response. The Eucharist, in particular, is portrayed as a participation in the cosmic liturgy of creation, inviting believers to see their daily joys and sufferings as part of God's redemptive plan. Sacraments thus embody the unity of the sacred and the secular, the divine and the human. Building on this vision, Rahner also explores the existential and ecumenical implications of sacramental theology. While acknowledging the theological divisions between Protestant and Catholic traditions regarding sacraments, he also points to a growing consensus around the deeper meaning of sacraments beyond rigid institutional understandings. He affirms that sacraments in the Church arise organically from the Church's proclamation of the Word, which represents its most profound identity. The Word of God is not just a sign of God's presence in the world, but an efficacious Word that can be heard, and which brings about a concrete transformation in the hearer. Rejecting the separation of Word and Sacrament, he views them as mutually illuminating, both rooted in the Church's mission as the mediator of divine grace in the world. Drawing on Vatican II, Rahner describes the Church itself as the "basic sacrament of salvation" (*Ursakrament des Heiles*)—a visible and eschatological sign of the unity between the divine and the human. Ultimately, sacraments are God's radical words of love, grounded in the concrete historical dimension of human existence (*Leiblichkeit*) and oriented toward the eschatological redemption of the human person. For further discussion, see Karl Rahner, "Was ist ein Sakrament," in *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 18, *Leiblichkeit der Gnade: Schriften zur Sakramentenlehre*, ed. Wendelin Knoch and Tobias Trappe (Freiburg: Verlag Herder, 2003), 477–88; "What Is a Sacrament?," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 14, *Questions in the Church, The Church in the World*, trans. David Bourke (New York: Seabury Press; London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1976), 312–25.

of the Hypostatic Union, insisting that the visible and invisible dimensions of Christian life must be held together in inseparable unity-in-distinction. Just as in Christ the divine and human natures are distinct yet inseparably united, so too in the sacraments—and indeed in all of Christian reality—the visible sign and the invisible grace must be simultaneously distinguished and unified.<sup>676</sup> For Rahner, this unity-in-distinction defines not only sacramental theology but also ecclesiology. It provides a framework for understanding the Church as both a visible, juridically structured institution and a supernatural reality of grace in the world.<sup>677</sup> The Church, like the sacraments it administers, is a bodily and historical symbol that renders the hidden mystery of divine grace concretely present in space and time through its prophetic ministry.<sup>678</sup>

Rahner brings his sacramental understanding of the Church to its fullest expression by describing the Church herself as the “Proto-Sacrament” (*Grundsakrament*), the foundational symbol of God’s presence and grace in the world.<sup>679</sup> In this view, the Church in its full, tangible reality—including its visible structure, juridical order, and historical presence—is not merely a human institution but a real sacramental sign of God’s salvific will.<sup>680</sup> Its bodily nature is juridically determinable and externally verifiable, and through this visible form it truly mediates grace in history.<sup>681</sup> Yet Rahner is equally clear that this visible form, while

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676. See Rahner, “Membership of the Church,” 73.

677. See Rahner, “Membership of the Church,” 73.

678. For further discussion on the prophetic responsibilities of the Church and how it concretely mediates grace in the world, see Karl Rahner, *Le courage du théologien: Dialogues*, trans. Jean-Pierre Bagot (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1985), 63–72.

679. See Rahner, “Membership of the Church,” 73.

680. See Rahner, “Membership of the Church,” 73.

681. In “Die Kirche als Ort der Geistsendung”, (1956) Rahner expresses this view even clearer: “The Church is nothing else than the further projection of the historicity and of the visibility of Jesus through space and time, and every word of its message, every one of its sacramental signs, is, once more, nothing else than a part of the world in its earthiness [*Leiblichkeit*], with which the Spirit has united itself indissolubly since the day on which the Logos became flesh” (See Karl Rahner, “Die Kirche als Ort der Geistsendung,” in *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 10, *Kirche in den Herausforderungen der Zeit: Studien zur Ekklesiologie und zur kirchlichen*

efficacious, must not be conflated with the divine grace it mediates. God's grace remains a sovereign mystery—freely given and never reducible to institutional mechanisms or juridical control.<sup>682</sup> Rahner therefore distinguishes two valid ways of speaking about the Church: in terms of its visible, institutional bodily form, and in terms of the mystery of divine grace it mediates. He writes:

The Church is in a certain sense the Proto-Sacrament [*Ursakrament*]; this means, however, that she is, in her whole concrete, visible and juridically verifiable appearance, a real sign and embodiment [*Verleiblichung*] of the salvific will of God and of the grace of Christ. That is, she has a bodily nature [*Leiblichkeit*] which as such possesses an unmistakable, fully determined and juridically determinable form, and which actually causes the grace which it renders present in the historical here and now; and yet that bodily nature remains essentially different from this divine grace which will always be the sovereign mystery of God's freedom and can never be subdued by man. Hence there can be, as in the case of the Sacraments, a *twofold notion of the Church*.<sup>683</sup>

Rahner's concept of the Church as Proto-Sacrament upholds a unity-in-distinction between its historical, bodily structure and the invisible grace it communicates. Its bodily, juridical, and institutional form (*Leiblichkeit*), through which it acts, is essential to its role as the ongoing mediation of Christ's presence in the world. Yet this visible form never exhausts the invisible mystery it signifies. The Church remains the real historical continuation of the Incarnation, but as Rahner cautions, grace always exceeds institutional boundaries. For this reason, the mystical or spiritual body of Christ can be meaningfully distinguished, but never separated, from the tangible historical Church.<sup>684</sup> As Rahner states elsewhere, "When we say that the Church is the persisting presence of the incarnate Word in space and time, we imply

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*Existenz*, ed. Josef Heinzlbezt and Albert Raffelt [Freiburg: Verlag Herder, 2003], 319; "The Church as the Subject of the Sending of the Spirit," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 7, *Further Theology of the Spiritual Life I*, trans. David Bourke [New York: Seabury Press; London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1971], 188–189.)

682. See Rahner, "Membership of the Church," 73.

683. Rahner, "Die Gliedschaft in der Kirche," 60; "Membership of the Church," 73.

684. See Rahner, "Membership of the Church," 74.

at once that it continues the symbolic function of the Logos in the world.”<sup>685</sup>

## 9.2. The Church: Sinful and Holy

If the Church is the Proto-Sacrament of Christ’s presence in the world, it must be understood as such even in its most paradoxical form: a community of concrete members, who are at once holy and sinful. This section examines the paradoxical nature of the Church as both sinful and holy, grounded in its historicity as the visible community of members who make up the body of Christ. While the Church bears within itself the weakness and fallibility of its human members, it nevertheless remains the enduring sacramental presence of divine grace in history. Rahner explores how sin and holiness can coexist within the Church’s concrete, bodily, and historical form (*Leiblichkeit*) without undermining its essential identity as the locus of God’s sanctifying grace. This discussion will develop through the following themes: (1) the Church of sinners and (2) the Church of saints.

### 9.2.1. The Church of Sinners

In “Kirche der Sünder” (1947), Rahner reflects on the Church of sinners by affirming a central article of Catholic faith: that sinners—even those in a state of grave sin, without sanctifying grace, and ultimately destined for damnation—can nevertheless be true members of the Church.<sup>686</sup> However, this statement must be properly interpreted in light of the precise theological meanings of the terms “Church” and “sinner” as used in Catholic dogma. In this

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685. Rahner, “The theology of the Symbol,” 240.

686. See Karl Rahner, “Kirche der Sünder,” in *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 10, *Kirche in den Herausforderungen der Zeit: Studien zur Ekklesiologie und zur kirchlichen Existenz*, ed. Josef Heinzlitz and Albert Raffelt (Freiburg: Verlag Herder, 2003), 82–95; “The Church of Sinners,” in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 6, *Concerning Vatican Council II*, trans. Karl-H. and Boniface Kruger (Baltimore, MD: Helicon Press; London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1969), 253–69. This belief has been consistently upheld throughout the Church’s history. It was defended in the early centuries against groups like the Montanists, Novatianists, and Donatists; in the Middle Ages against the Albigensians, the Fraticelli, Wyclif, and Hus; and in more recent times against the Reformers, Jansenism, and the Synod of Pistoia (see Rahner, “The Church of Sinners,” 256).

context, “Church” does not refer to a purely spiritual communion of the elect but to the visible and historical reality in which God’s grace is made present through sacramental signs. The Church is, for Rahner, the concrete embodiment of Christ in human history—a visible and juridical community that mediates divine grace in space and time. It is precisely this paradoxical union of human fallibility and divine presence that constitutes the Church’s sacramental character. He writes:

For the word ‘Church’ signifies in this connection the visible presence of God and his grace in this world in sacramental signs, it means the historical embodiment of Christ in the here and now of the world until he comes again to ‘appear’ in the glory of his Godhead; ‘Church’ signifies here what is human, which while it is really distinct from what is divine is yet inseparably united with it.<sup>687</sup>

The Church refers to a visible, historical, and juridical structure that sacramentally embodies the presence of God in the world, as grace.<sup>688</sup> While the Church remains a human reality composed of sinful persons, it is also inseparably united with the divine through Christ’s enduring and loving presence, as uncreated grace. This unity of the human and the divine, grounded in bodiliness (*Leiblichkeit*), is what makes the Church the sacramental manifestation of Christ in history—a reality that includes within it the mystery of sin and grace, fallibility and holiness, unfaithfulness and promise.

Rahner also clarifies the theological meaning of the phrase “sinner in the Church” as used in Catholic dogma, emphasising that it does not refer to civil wrongdoing or moral failure in a merely legal sense. In this doctrinal context, the term “sinner” designates

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687. Rahner, “Kirche der Sünder,” 85; “The Church of Sinners,” 257.

688. In “Kirche und Parusie Christi” (1963), Rahner further emphasizes the Church’s historicity: “But even this permanent and indestructible element she has in a really genuine historical form which changes, which must always be sought anew, which must be endured in its historical originality and contingency” (Karl Rahner, “Kirche und Parusie Christi,” in *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 10, *Kirche in den Herausforderungen der Zeit: Studien zur Ekklesiologie und zur kirchlichen Existenz*, ed. Josef Heinzlbeitz and Albert Raffelt (Freiburg: Verlag Herder, 2003), 628; “The Church and the Parousia of Christ,” in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 6, *Concerning Vatican Council II*, trans. Karl-H. and Boniface Kruger (Baltimore, MD: Helicon Press; London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1969), 298.

someone who is truly without the grace of God—someone spiritually estranged, whose life may even be unfolding in the direction of eternal damnation—yet who nevertheless remains a real and visible member of the Church.<sup>689</sup> This membership is not merely nominal or administrative; it signifies an ontological belonging to the body of Christ. Rahner explains:

‘A sinner in the Church’ does not here signify a person who has been in conflict with the police (this can happen occasionally even to the dearest friend of God), but ‘sinner’ in this article of the faith signifies a person who is in reality devoid of God’s grace, a person who is wandering far from God, a person whose destiny is perhaps moving with fearful consistency towards an ultimate eternal damnation. And *this* sinner belongs to *this* Church: he is not merely entered in her official register but is her member, a part of the visible presence of God’s grace in the world, a member of the Body of Christ!<sup>690</sup>

For Rahner, this paradox is central to understanding the Church’s sacramental character: even those who have fallen from grace still truly belong to the visible body of Christ.<sup>691</sup> Their

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689. Lennan interprets Rahner’s position on the sinfulness of the Church not only a fact of experience, but also as a truth of faith. See Lennan, *The Ecclesiology of Karl Rahner*, 29.

690. Rahner, “Kirche der Sünder,” 85; “The Church of Sinners,” 257.

691. In “Sündige Kirche nach den Dekreten des Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzils” (1965), Rahner revisits and expands on this theme of the sinful Church in light of Vatican II theology. His interpretation of *Lumen Gentium* reveals his concern to uphold both the objective holiness of the Church and its subjective entanglement with sin. He acknowledges that Vatican II’s *Constitution on the Church* does not treat the topic of the sinful Church systematically or with the detail one might hope for, and that the Council Fathers avoided terms such as “sinful Church,” likely due to theological caution and a lack of widespread consensus at the time. However, Rahner insists that the Constitution does provide significant points of departure for such a theology, especially through its emphasis on the pilgrim Church. The Church is presented not as an abstract divine entity moving through history and untouchable by sin, but as *ecclesia peregrinans*, deeply embedded in the historical condition of sin, suffering, and human limitations. This image of the Church creates a theological space for viewing the Church as both the bearer and subject of sin—a view with strong Augustinian roots, which sees the earthly Church as not yet perfected and in need of continual purification, penance, and inner reform (*Ecclesia semper reformanda*). Rahner also points out that *Lumen Gentium* acknowledges that sinners are not merely external to the Church but belong to its interior life—in *Ecclesiae sinu* (no. 8)—even when they persist in grave sin. These individuals are still described as being “incorporated” into the Church (*corpore sed non corde*), echoing Augustine’s distinction between bodily and spiritual membership. This incorporation, Rahner argues, has positive salvific significance, analogous to the valid but unfruitful reception of a sacrament, which still carries the potential for spiritual revival. Consequently, these sinners are not just ministered to by the Church—they are part of the Church, and their sin affects its very being. Thus, the Church is not merely surrounded by sinners; it is, in a real sense, the community of sinners in its historical embeddedness (*Leiblichkeit*). The Constitution itself affirms this when it states that the Church must continually purify herself, strive for renewal, and endure temptations. These are not merely difficulties, Rahner asserts; they are moral challenges that stem from sin within the Church’s own concretely embodied members and institutions. Although the document does not explicitly use the term “sinful Church,” Rahner contends that recognising the Church as the Church of sinners is the only way it can truthfully confess its holiness—not as a human achievement, but as the unmerited gift of God’s victorious grace acting in its history and sacraments. Only such a Church can be both credible and reformable, standing under the cross as both redeemed and yet always needing redemption. For further discussion, see Karl Rahner, “Sündige Kirche nach den Dekreten des Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzils,” in *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 21/1, *Beiträge zum Konzil und seiner Interpretation*, ed. Karl-Rahner-Stiftung, under the

membership is not merely juridical but real, because the Church is not a fellowship of the morally pure but a sacrament of grace in history, where divine holiness and human sinfulness remain in unresolved tension.<sup>692</sup>

Rahner maintains that while sin is undeniably present within the Church's historical and visible structures, it does not belong to the holiness that constitutes its essential nature. In the tangible, bodily reality of the Church—as a historical and social institution—both sin and holiness coexist. Yet these two are not on equal footing: holiness is the authentic expression of the Church's true identity, while sin remains a contradiction that obscures rather than reveals its inner essence.<sup>693</sup> The Church's holiness is rooted in the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, who has irrevocably united itself to the Church in history.<sup>694</sup> It is this Spirit-grounded

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direction of Karl Lehmann, Johann B. Metz, Karl-Heinz Neufeld et al. (Freiburg: Verlag Herder, 2004), 626–640; “The Sinful Church in the Decrees of the Council,” in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 6, *Concerning Vatican Council II*, trans. Karl-H. and Boniface Kruger (Baltimore, MD: Helicon Press; London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1969), 270–93.

692. Although it is a clear teaching that a sinner belongs to the Church, Rahner notes that this “belonging” is not the same—at least qualitatively—as the way a justified person belongs to the Church. The distinction between how a sinner and a non-sinner belong to the Church lies in the Church's dual nature, which he explains as both a visible, external society and a spiritual, grace-filled body (see Rahner, “The Church of Sinners,” 258). A non-sinner—someone in a state of grace—belongs to the Church in its fullest sense: not only externally, as a visible member of the juridical institution, but also internally, as a living member united with the Church's soul, which is the Holy Spirit. This full membership means that the person is integrated into the divine life of grace and the eschatological power that constitute the Church's true essence as the Body of Christ. In contrast, the sinner, though still visibly a member of the Church—acknowledged by its juridical structure and sacramental order—lacks this inner participation in grace. Rahner affirms that “since the sinner does not possess this Holy Spirit, it is self-evident that he does not simply belong to the Church in the full sense of the word ‘Church’ which we have indicated” (see Rahner, “The Church of Sinners,” 258). To clarify this distinction, Rahner draws an analogy with the structure of a sacrament. Just as a sacrament can be “valid” without being “fruitful”—that is, capable of conveying grace only under the right dispositions—so too can membership in the Church be either merely juridically valid or truly grace-filled. The Church, as *Ursakrament* (basic sacrament), possesses both an outward, visible form and an inward, spiritual reality (See Rahner, “The Church of Sinners,” 259). The sinner retains “valid” membership in the Church by virtue of formal inclusion in its visible body, but this membership is no longer “fruitful,” since it no longer mediates grace. In this sense, the sinner “has turned this sign into a lie,” comparable to one who receives the sacraments unworthily. The sinner's continued membership in the Church therefore lacks the efficacy and inner union with God and others in the Holy Spirit that defines the Church as a living communion (See Rahner, “The Church of Sinners,” 259). Hence, while the sinner remains juridically within the Church, he stands outside its true, sanctifying life.

693. See Rahner, “The Church of Sinners,” 262–263.

694. The Holy Spirit stands at the centre of Rahner's understanding of grace as a concretely embodied reality within the Church. In his account, the mystical tradition consistently bears witness to the experience of God not as an abstract principle, but as a personified presence encountered in the depths of one's own historical and everyday existence—an immediacy which Rahner identifies with the experience of the Holy Spirit. For

holiness that testifies to the Church's divine mission and spiritual character, visibly manifested in the lives of its faithful members.<sup>695</sup>

Rahner locates the source of sin in the Church within its historical and bodily condition, not in its divine essence. Because the Church exists as a concrete, historical community composed of human beings, it shares in the vulnerability and fallibility that accompany human embodiment and freedom. In this sense, sin can and does emerge within its members and even within its hierarchical structures. While Rahner acknowledges that such failures are rightly described as "sins of the Church," he insists they do not spring from the Church's inner, grace-filled life. Rather, they arise from the misuse of freedom by her human members.<sup>696</sup> For this reason, sin obscures the Church's true identity rather than manifesting it. As Rahner explains, sin should be regarded as "an exogenetic illness in the bodily nature of the Church" rather than "an endogenetic hereditary flaw."<sup>697</sup> In other words, sin is not congenital to the Church's embodied form but is an external disorder introduced from without—an affliction made possible only by the historical freedom of its members:

When the Church acts, gives a lead, makes decisions ... this activity of the Church is not carried out by some abstract principle and not by the Holy Spirit alone, but rather this whole activity of the Church is at the same time the activity of concrete men. And since they can in fact commit sin, since they can be culpably narrow, culpably egoistic, self-satisfied, obstinate, sensual or indolent, this sinful attitude of theirs will naturally affect also those actions which they initiate precisely as ecclesiastics and in the name of the Church as acts of the concrete Church.<sup>698</sup>

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further discussion, see Karl Rahner, *The Spirit in the Church*, trans. John Griffiths (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), 8–14.

695. See Rahner, "The Church of Sinners," 263.

696. See Rahner, "The Church of Sinners," 263.

697. See Rahner, "The Church of Sinners," 263. Cf. Yves Congar, *True and False Reform in the Church*, trans. Paul Philibert (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2011), 145–54. Congar (1904–1995) develops a theology of reform that regards the Church's visible and juridical form as historically conditioned yet sacramentally indispensable. His insistence that sin in the Church arises from her human members rather than her divine constitution parallels Rahner's analogy of the Church's "exogenetic illness."

698. Rahner, "Kirche der Sünder," 88; "The Church of Sinners," 260–261.

Sin within the Church is not an expression of its identity but the consequence of its historical embodiment in fallible human persons and structures. It arises precisely because the Church's visible and institutional actions are carried out by concretely embodied individuals whose freedom includes the possibility of sin. While such sin may be enacted in the Church's name and even affect her juridical and sacramental life, it does not alter or negate the Church's essential holiness, which is grounded not in her members' moral perfection but in the enduring presence of the Holy Spirit. At its root, sin always contradicts God and God's Christ, who is sinless and sanctifies the Church through the Spirit. For this reason, sin can never be reinterpreted as an element of the Church's essential identity.<sup>699</sup>

### 9.2.2. The Church of Saints

In "Die Kirche der Heiligen" (1956), Rahner contends that Catholic theology has too often treated the saints in a limited and functional way, with primary emphasis on their veneration rather than on their deeper theological and personal significance within the mystery of the Church.<sup>700</sup> When official Church teaching speaks of the saints—usually in connection with the worship due to Christ—it tends to emphasize the Council of Trent's response to the Reformers. The Tridentine focus rests chiefly on the legitimacy and spiritual benefit of honouring the saints and seeking their intercession.<sup>701</sup> However, this approach

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699. See Rahner, "The Church of Sinners," 263–264. Rahner also gives practical suggestions on how to deal with the sinfulness of the Church. For further discussion, see "The Church of Sinners," 264–269.

700. See Karl Rahner, "Die Kirche der Heiligen," in *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 10, *Kirche in den Herausforderungen der Zeit: Studien zur Ekklesiologie und zur kirchlichen Existenz*, ed. Josef Heinzlbezt and Albert Raffelt (Freiburg: Verlag Herder, 2003), 290–301; "The Church of the Saints," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 3, *The Theology of the Spiritual Life*, trans. Karl-H. and Boniface Kruger (Baltimore, MD: Helicon Press; London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1967), 91–104.

701. See Rahner, "The Church of the Saints," 92. See also Heinrich Denzinger, *Compendium of Creeds, Definitions, and Declarations on Matters of Faith and Morals*, ed. Peter Hünermann (San Francisco: Ignatian Press, 43e, 2012), 984.

largely neglects a fuller ecclesiological reflection: Who are the saints for us? What do they reveal about the Church's nature? And why do they matter for Christian life beyond their intercessory role? According to Rahner, these questions are often left unexplored or relegated to the margins of theological discourse. Even the standard dogmatic title given to the theme of saints—that is, “On the veneration of the saints (*De cultu sanctorum*)”—reveals a narrowness of focus. The emphasis remains on the devotional practice, not on the saints themselves or their formative role in the life of the Church, especially “at the time when they were still pilgrims with us on this earth and gradually becoming Saints.”<sup>702</sup>

Rahner proposes that a fruitful starting point for developing a theology of the “Church of the Saints” lies in reflecting on the Church's power to canonize. Canonization, he argues, is not merely an external honour or devotional act; it is a profound expression of the Church's inner identity and spiritual self-awareness. When the Church declares someone a saint, it is not simply recognising individual virtue but affirming its own nature as a community of holiness. In this sense, canonization becomes a theological act by which the Church articulates and affirms its essence as the locus of God's sanctifying grace in the world.<sup>703</sup> For Rahner, this holiness is not merely an eschatological projection but a real, visible, and historically grounded one. It makes the Church a *signum elevatum in nationibus* (“a raised sign among the nations”), accessible to those who seek the Church in humility and truth.<sup>704</sup> This holiness, Rahner asserts, is made perceptible in the concrete fruits of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control—by which the grace of God becomes operative and evident in the lives of the saints and faithful

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702. Rahner, “The Church of the Saints,” 92.

703. See Rahner, “The Church of the Saints,” 93.

704. See Rahner, “The Church of the Saints,” 95.

members in the Church.<sup>705</sup>

For Rahner, if the Church is to affirm itself theologically as a holy community, this holiness must be demonstrable in concrete, historical form in order for such theology to remain credible.<sup>706</sup> The Church must be able to point to a “cloud of witnesses”—a community of sanctified individuals—who can be identified by name as visible embodiments of its interior holiness.<sup>707</sup> In this light, the saints are essential to the Church’s self-understanding as a holy institution. As Rahner insists, “her actual Saints belong to the Church’s innermost being and [are] not merely something which she ‘also’ achieves ‘on the side,’ something which has been inspired by a purely human need for hero worship.”<sup>708</sup> Thus, the canonized saints, humanly embodied, are constitutive of the identity of the Church as a holy community.

The communion of saints, therefore, reveals the very nature of the Church’s holiness. This holiness is not merely an abstract or speculative theological notion but a visible and embodied reality—a holiness lived out in specific historical persons who belong integrally to the visible Church. In Rahner’s vision, the saints are not simply members of the Church; they are essential to her constitution. Their lived holiness, historically situated and concretely enacted, participates in the Church’s own visible identity and spiritual mission.<sup>709</sup> The holiness of the Church is, in part, the embodied history of her saints. Without them, the Church would lack the existential witness that shows the sanctifying power of grace acting visibly in the world.

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705. See Rahner, “The Church of the Saints,” 95.

706. See also Lennan, *The Ecclesiology of Karl Rahner*, 32.

707. See Rahner, “The Church of the Saints,” 96–97.

708. Rahner, “The Church of the Saints,” 96.

709. See Rahner, “The Church of the Saints,” 97.

The holiness of the Church must take visible and historical form in the concrete lives of its members. These baptized individuals—who believe, love, and persevere in faith—are concrete historical persons who belong to the visible, historical Church as living members of Christ’s Body.<sup>710</sup> For Rahner, their sanctity is not a matter of private or interior holiness alone but the outward, embodied sign of the Church’s essential holiness and true nature. The saints are the historical and visible manifestation of what the Church authentically is: a community of grace whose holiness unfolds within the bodily, temporal, and social dimension of human existence (*Leiblichkeit*). In bodiliness, the Church’s holiness becomes a tangible symbol, testifying to God’s grace concretely at work in the world.

In conclusion, Rahner’s ecclesiology is rooted in a theological realism that refuses to separate the Church’s historical embodiment from its sacramental identity. The Church is not reducible either to an invisible community of faith or to a merely juridical institution. Rather, it is the concrete, visible, and embodied mediation of divine grace in history—the historical continuation of Christ’s loving presence in the world. In this sense, the Church is the *Grundsakrament*, the “foundational-sacrament” in which the visible and the invisible, the human and the divine, remain inseparably united.<sup>711</sup>

This sacramental embodiment, therefore, carries the full weight of history. The Church exists as a community composed of both sinners and saints. Sin, though real and visible in its members and structures, does not, however, belong to the Church’s inner essence but arises from the fallibility of human freedom. Holiness, by contrast, defines the Church’s true identity. The lives of the saints embody this holiness in concrete, historical

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710. See Rahner, “The Church of the Saints,” 97.

711. Cf. Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God*, trans. Paul Barrett (London: Sheed and Ward, 1963), 15–27. Schillebeeckx (1914–2009) articulates Christ and the Church as sacraments—bodily realities mediating grace—in a manner that closely parallels Rahner’s notion of *Grundsakrament*, though with a more explicitly pastoral and liturgical emphasis.

form, providing existential proof that the holiness of the Church is more than an abstract idea: it is a concretely embodied holiness in which the grace of Christ becomes tangibly manifest through its faithful members.

In this light, Rahner's ecclesiology reveals the indispensability of *Leiblichkeit*. The Church mediates grace not despite its visible and historical form but through it. Its juridical structures, sacraments, and bodily members are constitutive of its nature as the Body of Christ. To speak of the Church is therefore to speak of an ecclesiastical *Leiblichkeit*: a visible, historical, and embodied reality that dispenses the mystery of God's love and grace to humanity in a concrete way. By situating ecclesiology within the horizon of bodiliness, Rahner shows that the Church's sacramental form is a concrete extension of the Incarnation itself. Just as the Word became flesh, so too the Church continues as Christ's embodied presence in history. Rahner's ecclesiology, therefore, must be read through the lens of *Leiblichkeit*: the Church as the sacramental embodiment of Christ's grace in the world.

## Chapter 10

### **Bodiliness and Eschatology: The Final Consummation of Humanity and Creation**

Christian eschatology, traditionally concerned with the “last things”—death, resurrection, judgement, and eternal life—has often been treated primarily as reflection on the destiny of the soul beyond earthly existence. For Rahner, however, eschatological reflection cannot be severed from earthly life and the concrete history of human embodiment. This chapter therefore explores *Leiblichkeit* (bodiliness) as pivotal to Rahner’s eschatological vision. It examines the place of the body within eschatological discourse, particularly with regard to the Christian doctrine of the resurrection and the reality of salvation.

Rahner integrates the theological affirmation of the resurrection of the body with an anthropology that understands the human person as an inseparable unity of matter and spirit. Human beings are not spiritual entities who merely happen to possess a material body, but fundamentally spiritual–bodily persons whose ultimate eschatological destiny necessarily includes their material existence in the world (*Leiblichkeit*). For Rahner, therefore, bodiliness is not a marginal eschatological theme but its very hermeneutical foundation. It determines how claims about the ultimate future of humanity and the final consummation of creation must be theologically understood.

This integration sets Rahner against two inadequate tendencies: abstract spiritualism, which reduces salvation to the fate of an immaterial soul, and reductive demythologization, which dismisses biblical eschatological imagery as fiction. Rahner’s eschatology avoids both extremes by developing a hermeneutic of biblical symbolism that recognises the apocalyptic language of Scripture as neither literary reportage nor fiction, but as the symbolic disclosure of real theological truths: the final consummation of humanity and the ultimate

transfiguration of the material world in God.

The chapter develops this claim in two stages. Section one examines Rahner's interpretation of the doctrine of the resurrection of the body, focusing first on his reading of biblical apocalyptic imagery, and then on his understanding of resurrection as the final consummation of matter. Section two turns to Rahner's theological anthropology, outlining the role of the body in salvation history and showing how *Leiblichkeit* functions as an open, relational system through which grace and salvation unfold.

### 10.1. The Resurrection of the Body

This section examines Rahner's interpretation of apocalyptic language in relation to the doctrine of the resurrection of the body. Against both overly literalist and reductively demythologising approaches, Rahner affirms the symbolic depth of scriptural eschatology, arguing that apocalyptic imagery must be read as a poetic expression of authentic theological truths rather than discarded as fiction or myth. The symbolic apocalyptic language of the final resurrection, drawn from material and historical human experience, points not to an abstract afterlife but to the transfiguration of human history itself as the final consummation of matter. The discussion unfolds in two parts: (1) the use of apocalyptic imagery for describing the resurrection of the body, and (2) the resurrection of the body as the ultimate consummation or transformation of matter.

#### 10.1.1. Apocalyptic Imagery and Language

In "Auferstehung des Fleisches" (1953), Rahner approaches the resurrection of the body by distinguishing between "orthodox" and "unorthodox" attitudes toward Church

doctrine and biblical apocalyptic imagery concerning the end times.<sup>712</sup> According to him, the orthodox Catholic accepts the Church's teachings on the end times— as laid out in the Roman Catechism and the broader tradition of the Church, even if only certain aspects are immediately practical or meaningful—leaving space for growth and deeper understanding.<sup>713</sup> The unorthodox, by contrast, tend to reject what appears unclear or lacking in immediate relevance to their lived experience of faith. They often evaluate doctrine critically and dismiss what does not align with personal experience, scientific verification, and contemporary sensibilities.<sup>714</sup> For Rahner, this unorthodox approach risks narrowing the scope of faith and reducing it to the limits of one's personal understanding. In contrast, the more patient and receptive attitude of the orthodox believer allows space for divine truths to unfold meaningfully through time, even if they are not yet fully understood.<sup>715</sup>

Rahner turns to the doctrine of the resurrection of the body, noting that it is among the teachings of the Catechism most frequently neglected or insufficiently reflected upon by both “orthodox” and “unorthodox” believers.<sup>716</sup> The unorthodox, or “demythologising” approach, as he calls it, frequently dismisses the doctrine as either myth or mere metaphor. Conversely, orthodox believers often accept it in a more literal sense, yet without serious theological engagement or critical reflection.<sup>717</sup> Acknowledging the weight of modern objections— particularly from those who seek to demythologise the doctrine in light of contemporary

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712. See Karl Rahner, “Auferstehung des Fleisches,” in *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 12, *Menschsein und Menschwerdung Gottes: Studien zur Grundlegung der Dogmatik, zur Christologie, Theologischen Anthropologie und Eschatologie*, ed. Herbert Vorgrimler (Freiburg: Verlag Herder, 2005), 512–21; “The Resurrection of the Body,” *Theological Investigations*, vol. 2, *Man in the Church II*, trans. Karl-H. Krüger, O.F.M. (Baltimore, MD: Helicon Press, 1963), 203–16.

713. See Rahner, “The Resurrection of the Body,” 203.

714. See Rahner, “The Resurrection of the Body,” 203.

715. See Rahner, “The Resurrection of the Body,” 204–5.

716. See Rahner, “The Resurrection of the Body,” 205.

717. See Rahner, “The Resurrection of the Body,” 205.

scientific and philosophical developments—Rahner concedes that while these objections are largely unorthodox, they nonetheless raise valid and pressing theological questions, such as: Where is heaven now? What kind of “body” does the glorified person have? If it eats, changes, or decays, how can it be glorified? But if it does not, can it still truly be called a “body” at all?<sup>718</sup>

In addressing these concerns, Rahner observes that the biblical narratives on the resurrection employ a rich variety of symbolic and, at times, divergent images.<sup>719</sup> Though these varied depictions point toward the resurrection, they highlight different dimensions: some speak only of the resurrection of the just, while others imply a universal resurrection; some describe the saints rising from the earth to meet Christ, while others portray them descending with him from heaven; at times the end occurs on a renewed earth, while in other accounts it takes place in a heavenly realm.<sup>720</sup> For Rahner, these differences are not contradictions but reflect the flexible and poetic nature of apocalyptic language. Such language is not intended to offer a scientific, technical, or literal account of eschatological events but to evoke awe and affirm God’s sovereign triumph over death and history itself.<sup>721</sup>

Rahner maintains that it is both legitimate and necessary to ask what theological realities the biblical authors intended to communicate through such imagery.<sup>722</sup> Asking such questions, he asserts, is not a reductive demythologization but a faithful act of interpretation that respects both the mystery and the form in which the mystery is conveyed.<sup>723</sup> While the

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718. See Rahner, “The Resurrection of the Body,” 207–8.

719. See Rahner, “The Resurrection of the Body,” 209–10.

720. See Rahner, “The Resurrection of the Body,” 210.

721. See Rahner, “The Resurrection of the Body,” 210.

722. See Rahner, “The Resurrection of the Body,” 210.

723. See Rahner, “The Resurrection of the Body,” 210.

dramatic imagery employed to describe the resurrection—falling stars, trumpet blasts, tombs opening—should not be interpreted literally, neither should the core realities they signify be easily dismissed as fiction.<sup>724</sup> The task of theology, then, is to discern the enduring truth within these symbols, namely, the promise of resurrection as God’s definitive victory over death and the ultimate transformation of creation. Rather than flattening these mysteries into a coherent system, theology, Rahner argues, must preserve the revelatory power of these symbols while articulating their meaning in ways that remain faithful and intelligible to contemporary faith.<sup>725</sup> In the imagery of bodily resurrection, the Church proclaims not an abstract metaphor of the soul’s redemption, but the ultimate transformation of embodied human existence (*Leiblichkeit*) into the eternal life of God.

### 10.1.2. The Resurrection as the Consummation of Matter

Rahner interprets the resurrection of the body as the final consummation of the whole human person, affirming the eternal fulfilment of embodied existence in its material and spiritual unity. He turns to the central theological question: What is truly meant when Christians profess belief in the “resurrection of the body”? In addressing this question, Rahner asserts that the resurrection of the body expresses the final and eternal fulfilment of the whole human person as an embodied historical spirit. In Rahner’s view, the term “body” (*Fleisch*) signifies more than just physical matter; it refers to the concrete, historical, and material existence of the human person as a unity of matter (body) and spirit (soul).<sup>726</sup> To affirm the resurrection, then, is to affirm that eternal life involves not only the soul’s union with God but the ultimate perfection of the total person in their full material and spiritual

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724. See Rahner, “The Resurrection of the Body,” 210.

725. See Rahner, “The Resurrection of the Body,” 210. See also *Foundations*, 431–34.

726. See Rahner, “The Resurrection of the Body,” 211.

complexity.

Acknowledging that the human person manifests itself concretely through multiple (plural) and interrelated dimensions, Rahner cautions against conceiving the resurrection as a uniform event realized in the same way or at the same moment for every individual. Each dimension of human existence attains its perfection through distinct processes and at different stages.<sup>727</sup> One dimension of this consummation, Rahner emphasizes, is that the human spirit—understood as the whole person in a justified relationship or spiritual union with God—may already enter the beatific vision at the moment of death: “In so far as this union with God constitutes the innermost being of blessed completion, ‘heaven’ and ‘eternal happiness’ can already be given with death.”<sup>728</sup>

Rahner insists that the beatific union with God does not sever the human person from history, the body, or the rest of creation, but rather confirms their eternal fulfilment in the doctrine of the resurrected body. According to him, nearness to God and connectedness to the material world are not opposed realities. The human spirit, even in heaven, remains somehow bound to history, to the body, and to creation’s final destiny. This means that the resurrection of the body is the necessary confirmation that God’s promise of eternal life applies to the total human person—body and soul. Rahner states:

Nevertheless, the deceased remains ‘united’ with the reality, fate and hence the temporal events of the world, however little we are able to ‘picture’ to ourselves such a continuing belonging-to-the-world and however few immediately comprehensible statements on this matter are contained in the Scriptures. We must simply try to realize clearly and soberly that a spiritual union with God cannot be regarded as something which grows in inverse proportion to a belonging to the material world.”<sup>729</sup>

Bodily resurrection affirms that our material, temporal, and historical existence is not

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727. See Rahner, “The Resurrection of the Body,” 211.

728. Rahner, “Auferstehung des Fleisches,” 517; “The Resurrection of the Body,” 211.

729. Rahner, “Auferstehung des Fleisches,” 517; “The Resurrection of the Body,” 211.

discarded but gathered up and fulfilled in eternal communion with God. Even after death, the human spirit remains connected to the world, to history, and to the destiny of creation. This continuing bond means that eternal life cannot be understood as a purely spiritual state detached from the bodily dimension of human existence (*Leiblichkeit*).

Rahner affirms that Christian revelation discloses the ultimate destiny of the material world not as annihilation but as transformation, culminating in creation's participation in the perfection of the human spirit. Revelation affirms that the concrete history of the world will not end in futility or nothingness but in perfect transfiguration. The temporality and finiteness of the world do not culminate in destruction but in its "participation in the perfection of the spirit."<sup>730</sup> The human spirit—though biologically insignificant in history—is in fact the meaning and goal of creation. It is not a foreign element in the world but a material, historical, and embodied spirit—intramundane and part of the world's destiny. Rahner states:

The personal spirit is the meaning of the whole reality of the world and, in spite of all its biologico-physical insignificance, it is *not merely* a strange guest in a world which, standing ultimately untouched and indifferent opposite this spirit, carries on its own history; the personal spirit, precisely as human spirit, is a material, mundane, incarnate, indeed *intra* mundane spirit. And so the end of the world is participation in the perfection of the spirit: the world remains, beyond its previous history, as the connatural surrounding of the achieved spirit which has found its finality in the fellowship with God and achieves its own history and that of the world at the same point.<sup>731</sup>

The personal human spirit, precisely as a material or bodily spirit in the world, confers meaning upon the ultimate fulfilment of creation. The temporal and finite order will not be discarded; rather, it will share in the perfection of the spirit. In the end, creation remains as the fitting environment for the spirit perfected in communion with God, so that the destiny of the world and the human person converge in a single eschatological fulfilment.

Rahner considers the resurrection of the body as the final fulfilment of both human

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730. Rahner, "Auferstehung des Fleisches," 519; "The Resurrection of the Body," 212–213.

731. Rahner, "Auferstehung des Fleisches," 519; "The Resurrection of the Body," 213.

history and the history of the world. The resurrection, in the strict sense, refers to the perfection of those who, through their earthly lives and in their deaths, have already united with God.<sup>732</sup> Their perfection, which began at the moment of death through their personal communion with God, now becomes complete and visible in the resurrection. The resurrection of the dead is not a beatific perfection of the soul only, but of the concrete human subject in their original unity of body and soul: “These human beings now become achieved as totalities with soul and body, and their perfection, already begun in death, becomes itself perfected, tangible in the world, embodied.”<sup>733</sup>

For Rahner, matter is not a provisional stage for the soul’s development but a genuine dimension of existence itself, destined to participate in the eschatological consummation of creation. Even though one cannot picture how this will take place, as it remains beyond imagination, he holds that faith and revelation assure us that we shall one day be made whole, fully alive in “all the dimensions of our existence.”<sup>734</sup> What we call the “material” aspect of our being—though we may not fully understand what belongs to its essence and what is only

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739. In “Zu einer Theologie des Todes” (1972), Rahner develops this understanding of death as a transition into a direct union with God. He reimagines death not as a mere biological conclusion of earthly life but as a transformative passage into communion with God. Death is presented as the culmination of a person’s temporal and historical freedom—a decisive moment in which human existence is drawn into the eternal mystery of God. Thus, death is not simply the end of life in time and space but a radical transformation that surpasses finite categories of human experience and brings the human person into the fullness of divine life in the beatific vision. Rahner also challenges superficial notions of Christian hope that treat eternal life as a calculable extension of temporal existence. True Christian hope, in his view, is a trusting surrender to the unfathomable mystery of God. In death, human freedom reaches its highest realization as the person entrusts their entire being to the divine love that both creates and fulfils. This final act of surrender is not the loss of individuality but its consummation—the moment in which a person’s entire life is gathered and offered as a self-gift to God. A central theme in Rahner’s theology is the rejection of dualistic anthropology. He affirms the essential unity of the human person as both body and spirit. Death is not the soul escaping the body but the transformation of the whole person by the redeeming power of God. This unified vision reveals death as the continuation of God’s salvific work in creation—a work that will ultimately lead to the renewal of all things in Christ. For further discussion, see Karl Rahner, “Zu einer Theologie des Todes,” in *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 22/2, *Dogmatik nach dem Konzil: Theologische Anthropologie und Ekklesiologie*, ed. Albert Raffelt (Freiburg: Verlag Herder, 2008), 230–44; “Ideas for a Theology of Death,” in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 13, *Theology, Anthropology, Christology*, trans. David Bourke (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), 169–86.

733. Rahner, “Auferstehung des Fleisches,” 519; “The Resurrection of the Body,” 214.

734. Rahner, “The Resurrection of the Body,” 214.

temporal or transitory—is not something unreal, worthless, or discarded in the end.<sup>735</sup> The entire cosmos, and matter in general, will, in some way, participate in the final perfection and transformation of the human spirit.<sup>736</sup> For Rahner, this means a transfiguration of matter into its final perfect form:

If, however, the material world is not simply an objective illusion, and is not merely some sort of material which must be taken off and on which the history of souls gets practice in freedom until it has achieved its end, but is a part of the true reality itself, then the material world does for that very reason enter into the consummation in accordance with the divine promise, and it too can participate in the state of finality and completion.<sup>737</sup>

Matter is part of human reality itself and shares in the final perfection of the human person promised by God. The material world is not a temporary stage for the soul's development but a true aspect of reality itself. Matter, too, shares in God's eschatological promise of perfection.<sup>738</sup>

In Rahner's view the glorified body—as prefigured in Christ's resurrection and

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735. See Rahner, "The Resurrection of the Body," 214.

743. This view of the eschatological transformation of matter is further developed in "Immanente und transzendente Vollendung der Welt" (1967). Rahner presents a vision in which matter, spirit, and the entire history of the world are drawn together into their final perfection by the transformative power of God's grace. He begins by clarifying that "consummation" is not mere cessation, but the definitive realization of a being's intrinsic purpose. "Pure matter," lacking self-direction or finality, cannot achieve consummation on its own. It remains incomplete unless integrated into the spiritual and historical unity of creation. Rahner underscores the essential unity of matter and spirit: matter is the medium through which the spirit exists and fulfils itself. This culminates, according to him, in doctrines like the resurrection of the body and the renewal of creation, which affirm the enduring, spiritual significance of material or bodily reality. Rahner also introduces the concept of "material self-transcendence"—the sustained capacity of matter to evolve toward spiritual fulfilment—as the theological key to understanding the eschatological transfiguration of the material world itself. For further discussion see Karl Rahner, "Immanente und transzendente Vollendung der Welt," in *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 15, *Verantwortung der Theologie: Im Dialog mit Naturwissenschaften und Gesellschaftstheorie*, ed. Hans-Dieter Mutschler (Freiburg: Verlag Herder, 2002), 544–56; "Immanent and Transcendent Consummation of the World," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 10, *Writings of 1965–1967 II*, trans. David Bourke (New York: Seabury Press, 1977), 273–89.

737. Rahner, "Auferstehung des Fleisches," 519–20; "The Resurrection of the Body," 214.

738. See also Peter C. Phan, *Eternity in Time and Space: A Study of Karl Rahner's Eschatology* (Selinsgrove, PA: Susquehanna University Press; London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1988), 47–50. Cf. Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 260–64. Johnson frames resurrection as God's promise to bring the whole creation—emphasising its ecological dimensions—into an eschatological finality.

expressed in Paul's notion of a 'spiritual body'—signifies a genuine yet transfigured embodiment in which the body becomes the pure expression of the human spirit in union with God. According to him, the resurrection of Christ offers humanity a glimpse of the glorified body. Through the testimony of the Apostles, the risen Christ provides a vision of what this glorified bodily existence might be. Yet the Apostles, still in the unfulfilled state of earthly life, could only perceive the resurrection in a translated and incomplete form.<sup>739</sup> For Rahner, the glorified body as it will be experienced in the beatific vision remains an unfathomable mystery. We can only approach it through St. Paul's paradoxical expression of a "spiritual body" (1 Cor. 15:44)—a genuine bodily existence that is the "pure expression of the spirit," fully united with God's *Pneuma*.<sup>740</sup> In this state, the body becomes entirely transparent to the spirit, completely freed from the limiting conditions of earthly temporality.

Rahner argues that the doctrine of bodily resurrection necessarily entails the concreteness of heaven, which cannot be reduced to a purely abstract state but must be affirmed as a real, though transcendent spatial dimension. He turns to the question of heaven's reality—whether it is a place or merely a state. As Christians, if one affirms the bodily resurrection of Christ and of others already glorified (such as Mary), then one must also affirm that this glorified existence entails some kind of spatial reality. In other words, for Rahner, if resurrected persons are real, then so is the reality in which they exist. Heaven cannot be purely symbolic or spiritual in the abstract sense:

If (and in so far as) we cannot think of the physical nature and concreteness of the risen and real person (even in accordance with what was experienced with regard to the risen Christ) in any other way than together with a definite spatial and local determination, then we must think of heaven as a place and not merely as a 'state.'<sup>741</sup>

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739. See Rahner, "The Resurrection of the Body," 214.

740. See Rahner, "The Resurrection of the Body," 214.

741. Rahner, "Auferstehung des Fleisches," 520; "The Resurrection of the Body," 214–15.

Belief in a real, bodily resurrection necessarily implies belief in a corresponding reality in which such persons exist. If glorified persons are concrete and physical, then heaven must likewise have a concrete, though transformed, spatial dimension, and cannot be reduced to a purely abstract or disembodied state.

Rahner distinguishes the “space” of heaven from the spatiality of our present physical universe, affirming it as a real but transcendent dimension of glorified, embodied existence. He cautions against identifying heaven with a location in our familiar, physical universe. The space of glorified bodies is not the same as the spatiality of our current world. Our material space is limited, finite, and tied to the unfinished history of non-glorified matter. In contrast, Rahner claims, the “space” of glorified existence (what we call heaven) belongs to a different order altogether. It is not a “place” in the empirical world but is still a real dimension of perfect, embodied existence.<sup>742</sup>

Rahner concludes that heaven, while not a location within our physical cosmos, must nevertheless be affirmed as a real though transcendent spatial dimension of glorified existence. He draws two key implications: (1) it is meaningless to ask where heaven is in physical terms, as though it could be located on a cosmic map; and yet (2) it remains entirely valid, even necessary, to affirm the reality of the glorified body as existing in a real, though transfigured, spatial dimension.<sup>743</sup> We are not bound to imagine this reality in physical images, as it will be revealed to us only once the history of the entire world has come to its complete perfection: “Once the history of the cosmos and of the spiritual world has come to its complete end, everything will be transformed. It will then be equally correct to call the one new reality a new heaven or a new earth.”<sup>744</sup> This “new heaven” and “new earth,”

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742. See Rahner, “The Resurrection of the Body,” 215.

743. See Rahner, “The Resurrection of the Body,” 215.

744. Rahner, “Auferstehung des Fleisches,” 521; “The Resurrection of the Body,” 215.

according to Rahner, will not be two separate worlds but names for the one new reality in which matter and spirit are reconciled and perfected together.<sup>745</sup>

Rahner's account of the resurrection of the body affirms that God's promise of eternal life embraces the whole human person in the fullness of their material and spiritual reality. The consummation of matter in the resurrection is not a return to the limitations of earthly existence, but its transfiguration into the perfect expression of the human spirit in communion with God. In this final state, the destiny of the human person and the destiny of creation converge in a single eschatological fulfilment—a “new heaven and a new earth”—in which human bodiliness (*Leiblichkeit*) is not abolished but perfected in the ultimate unity of matter and spirit in the beatific vision.

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745. In “Über die theologische Problematik der ‘Neuen Erde’” (1967), Rahner explores the theological meaning of the “new earth” and “new heaven” not as a rupture with the present world but as its transformation and perfection in God. Drawing on *Gaudium et Spes*, he insists that Christians are called to engage the world not merely out of moral duty or ideological activism but from a hope rooted in divine revelation. Their collaboration with both believers and non-believers must be guided by eschatological faith, which sees human dignity, justice, and love as anticipatory signs of the world's final consummation. Rahner critiques views that reduce Christian engagement with the world to formal obligations or abstract appeals to natural law, calling instead for a dynamic interaction between the Church's mission and the evolving realities of secular society. The Church, he argues, must not offer rigid blueprints for the future but must participate actively and humbly in shaping the world through dialogue with other disciplines—always grounded in the proclamation of the Kingdom of God. The “new earth” and “new heaven” are not imposed from above but emerge through human cooperation with grace in this present world, a cooperation that God alone will bring to completion in God's own time. Thus, Rahner affirms a continuity between the present world and the eschatological fulfilment of the “new earth” and “new heaven.” He rejects any dualism between them, insisting that the “new” creation is the old creation redeemed and transfigured—the outcome of both divine grace and the historical fruits of human action. In this sense, human acts of justice, creativity, and solidarity contribute meaningfully to the coming of the “new earth” and “new heaven,” though the ultimate transformation remains God's alone. Rahner critiques both Marxist utopianism, which overestimates human responsibility, and apocalypticism, which dismisses human efforts as irrelevant to the world's destiny. Instead, he proposes a theology that integrates divine action and human agency. Although the transformation of the world is not an exclusively Christian task—since grace operates universally beyond the boundaries of Christianity—Christians are called, in a special way, to witness to this hope by working to build a just and humane world. For it is in this world that God has permanently united himself to humanity in the historical Incarnation of the Logos. In shaping a better world, Christians bear visible signs of the “new earth” and “new heaven” already coming to be. For further discussion, see Karl Rahner, “Über die theologische Problematik der ‘Neuen Erde,’” in *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 15, *Verantwortung der Theologie: Im Dialog mit Naturwissenschaften und Gesellschaftstheorie*, ed. Hans-Dieter Mutschler (Freiburg: Verlag Herder, 2002), 557–66; “The Theological Problems Entailed in the Idea of the ‘New Earth,’” in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 10, *Writings of 1965–1967 II*, trans. David Bourke (New York: Seabury Press, 1977), 260–72.

## 10.2. The Body as the Eschatological Horizon of Salvation

This section examines Rahner's eschatological reflection on the human body. Created by God, embedded in history, and redeemed in Christ, the body is presented as an "open system": the very medium through which salvation unfolds concretely in the world. In this context, *Leiblichkeit* emerges as the key to understanding the eschatological future of the human person. The following aspects will be explored in this connection: (1) the theological understanding of the human body and (2) bodiliness as an open system through which salvation unfolds.

### 10.2.1. Theological Concept of the Body

In "Der Leib in der Heilsordnung" (1967), Rahner presents a theological reflection on the body by recognising the limits and possibilities of dogmatic theology when addressing questions about the human body.<sup>746</sup> Dogmatics, he insists, can indeed offer a meaningful account of bodiliness, provided it does so by carefully examining the Church's affirmations about the body and identifying the fundamental truths they share. In other words, the goal of a theology of the body is not to offer speculative answers or propose abstract theories about human nature but to draw a foundational theological understanding of the body from what the faith teaches.

Rahner maintains that any serious theology of the body must begin with at least seven foundational truths of Christian belief. The first is that "the body is created by God [*Der Leib ist von Gott geschaffen*]."<sup>747</sup> The God who is pure spirit—utterly transcendent, invisible, and

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746. See Karl Rahner, "Der Leib in der Heilsordnung," in *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 22/2, *Dogmatik nach dem Konzil, Teilband 2: Theologische Anthropologie und Ekklesiologie*, ed. Albert Raffelt (Freiburg: Verlag Herder, 2008), 159–174; "The Body in the Order of Salvation," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 17, *Jesus, Man and the Church*, trans. Margaret Kohl (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 71–89.

747. Rahner, "Der Leib in der Heilsordnung," 159; "The Body in the Order of Salvation," 71.

nameless—is also the Creator of this concrete, visible, tangible human body and everything else. The body we have, with its joys and sufferings, its limitations and beauty, is not an accident of nature but directly willed by God:

God is the creator of the human body as well as of everything else. That is to say, the God who is pure spirit, the ineffable mystery, who is incomprehensible and nameless, who dwells far off in unlocated majesty, has also created this body—this actual, visible body that we see, with which we have to cope, whose pleasures and pains we experience. It has been directly willed by God. This body is not just something that came about by chance.<sup>748</sup>

The body is directly created by God as a deliberate act of divine will. The same God who is pure spirit and absolute mystery has freely chosen to create this specific, tangible human body. In affirming this, Rahner rejects any view that excludes the human body from a supernatural divine purpose.<sup>749</sup> Human embodiment, like space, time, history, and sexuality, is positively intended by the Creator of heaven and earth.<sup>750</sup> For Rahner, even if this view is not expressed in the form of an infallible dogma, he argues that it follows from the broader doctrinal tradition of the Church, supported by authoritative teaching, including decisions of the Pontifical Biblical Commission.<sup>751</sup>

The second foundational truth builds on the Genesis account that “this body is made out of the dust of the earth [*dieser Leib geschaffen aus dem Staub der Erde*].”<sup>752</sup> While the

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748. Rahner, “Der Leib in der Heilsordnung,” 159; “The Body in the Order of Salvation,” 71–72.

749. “The body is already spirit, viewed in that aspect of self-consummation in which personal spirituality yields itself up in order to encounter directly and palpably what is different from itself. Bodily existence is not, therefore, something which is added to spirituality; it is the concrete existence of the spirit itself in space and time. Physical nature or the nature of the human body is not something already existing in itself. It is the self-expression of the spirit reaching out into space and time” (Rahner, “The Body in the Order of Salvation,” 84).

750. As Rahner puts it, “Space and time—and therefore history—and therefore the human body—and therefore human sexuality—are not things which God did not really desire. All of them are created by the One whom we call the creator of heaven and earth” (Rahner, “Der Leib in der Heilsordnung,” 159–60; “The Body in the Order of Salvation,” 72).

751. See Rahner, “The Body in the Order of Salvation,” 72.

752. Rahner, “Der Leib in der Heilsordnung,” 160; “The Body in the Order of Salvation,” 72.

image of God forming the human person from dust and breathing life into them may appear primitive or fictional, Rahner sees in it an important theological insight. The story captures a fundamental paradox: on the one hand, the human being is “formed from the dust,” a creature of the earth, bound to the material order; on the other, the human being stands in immediate relationship with the eternal God, directly created, personally addressed, and drawn into dialogue with God. As Rahner observes, “The Scriptures let us feel this tremendous tension ... the tension and the problem that are involved in the fact that man is created out of dust and is yet created by God.”<sup>753</sup>

The third foundational truth is that “original sin is transmitted through bodily procreation [*Die Erbsünde wird durch Zeugung weitergegeben*].”<sup>754</sup> For Rahner, this teaching is a fact of theology and does not imply that there is anything morally wrong, sinful, or inferior about the act of procreation itself. Rather, it points to a basic reality: “everyone belongs to this one, particular human race, where everyone is related to everyone else by blood; and this makes a person a member and sharer in what we call original sin.”<sup>755</sup> In Rahner’s view, original sin is not the personal guilt of Adam and Eve inherited by their descendants but the absence of sanctifying grace that should be present in human nature. According to God’s original plan, the human race was to be endowed with divine life and glory (sanctifying grace), yet this grace was lost in Adam and is no longer transmitted by natural descent. As a result, we are born into a state where this grace is lacking—not through

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753. Rahner, “The Body in the Order of Salvation,” 72. While drawing attention to this tension, Rahner does not resolve it prematurely. Rather, he warns against softening, spiritualising, and reducing the story into a platonic dualism of body and soul. The truth of the text lies in its paradox and tension: the human person is “created out of dust, yet by God”—called both into a relationship with the infinite God while remaining rooted in the concrete material conditions of the world (*Leiblichkeit*). This paradox, he suggests, is not a problem to be solved, but a mystery to be embraced. It is precisely in this tension that the true dignity and destiny of the human person emerges.

754. Rahner, “Der Leib in der Heilsordnung,” 161; “The Body in the Order of Salvation,” 73.

755. Rahner, “Der Leib in der Heilsordnung,” 161; “The Body in the Order of Salvation,” 73.

any personal fault, but because it is absent from the human condition.<sup>756</sup>

For Rahner, the loss of sanctifying grace and its restoration are both bodily and historical. Just as sanctifying grace was forfeited through our solidarity in the bodily descent from Adam, so it is restored only through bodily incorporation into Christ:

Grace is conferred on him only if he is also one who has been redeemed by Jesus Christ. But both things are based on this bodily community [*basiert auf dieser leibhaftigen Geschlechtsgemeinschaft*] of shared descent: the fact that according to God's plan man was to be endowed with sanctifying grace, divine life, divine nearness and divine glory; and the fact that he does not actually have all this.<sup>757</sup>

Both the loss and the restoration of sanctifying grace are rooted in bodily reality. Humanity lost grace through its shared, physical descent from Adam and regains it only through a new bodily solidarity—its incorporation into Christ, who restores the divine life once intended for all. Redemption, therefore, is inseparably linked to the same bodily solidarity by which humanity first lost grace.<sup>758</sup>

The fourth foundational truth about the human body centres on the mystery of the Incarnation and the Johannine declaration, “And the Word became flesh [*Und das Wort ist Fleisch geworden*]” (Jn 1:14). While acknowledging that the term “flesh” (*sarx*) in John carries a rich and complex meaning, Rahner draws a decisive theological conclusion: God chose to reveal and communicate Godself to the world as *sarx*:

The eternal Word of God, by uttering himself into what is not God out of the inner divine silence in which he is with the Father, becomes just what we call *sarx*—man; but truly physical man [*wirklich leibhaftiger Mensch*], man indeed who bears the marks of death, suffering man, man in his tribulation.<sup>759</sup>

In the Incarnation, God does not merely appear as human but truly becomes a physical,

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756. See Rahner, “The Body in the Order of Salvation,” 73.

757. Rahner, “Der Leib in der Heilsordnung,” 161; “The Body in the Order of Salvation,” 73.

758. See also Phan, *Eternity in Time and Space*, 61–63.

759. Rahner, “Der Leib in der Heilsordnung,” 161; “The Body in the Order of Salvation,” 74.

historical person (*sarx*) who shares fully in human nature. In becoming flesh, the eternal Word enters completely into the human condition and becomes fully human, concrete, historical, and bodily, in every respect.

Rahner cautions that “the Word became flesh” must not be understood as if flesh already existed and the Logos merely entered into it subsequently. Such an approach would make the Incarnation a secondary event, adding nothing essential to our understanding of Jesus’ humanity. Rather, the event of the Word becoming flesh determines the meaning of flesh itself. We do not first know what flesh is and then apply that concept to the Logos; rather, we understand flesh through what the Word has become. Flesh (*sarx*) is what comes into being when God freely utters Godself into the “otherness” of creation.<sup>760</sup> As Rahner explains:

The *sarx* is what comes into being when the Logos becomes something which it is not already in itself, in its divine nature. It is what comes into being when the Logos desires to be less and to become less than it is of itself. It is what comes into being, what is present, when the Logos manifests itself in the sphere in which it does not desire to be the infinite, blessed, intrinsically luminous Word of the Father, but issues from itself and speaks whither only the finite, creaturely Word can be heard. The flesh which is man is the self-utterance of God himself.<sup>761</sup>

In the strict theological sense, “flesh” (*sarx*) is not a pre-existing substance into which God subsequently enters, but the finite human reality brought forth when the Word freely became one with creation. *Sarx*, therefore, is the self-expression of God as a finite human creature that comes into being when the eternal Logos chooses humanity as its concretely embodied form.

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760. Here, Rahner openly acknowledges that this interpretation of the Incarnation goes beyond the explicit formulations of Catholic dogma. Yet he insists that his interpretation is correct and consistent with the Christian faith. The human being—insofar as they are flesh—is the event of God’s self-expression. To understand human bodiliness truly, one must begin with the Incarnation. The definitive answer to the question “What is man?” is not found in an abstract anthropology but in the affirmation: “And the Word became flesh.” (Rahner, “The Body in the Order of Salvation,” 74–75).

761. Rahner, “Der Leib in der Heilsordnung,” 162; “The Body in the Order of Salvation,” 75.

The fifth foundational truth concerning the body is that “as human beings we are all redeemed through Christ’s death [*der Mensch, wir alle sind durch den Tod Christi erlöst*]” on the cross.<sup>762</sup> For Rahner, the fact that redemption is accomplished through the bodily suffering and death of Christ reveals the body’s essential place in Christian eschatology. It is not enough to affirm in abstract terms that we are redeemed by the obedient love of the incarnate Son of God because this obedience and love were enacted concretely through Christ’s bodily passion, suffering, and death on the cross.

Rahner cautions against the long-standing theological tendency, especially from the medieval period, that tends to treat the bodily dimension of Christ’s death as incidental—as if it were merely an unfortunate accompaniment to a purely spiritual act of love. Such a view, he asserts, would suggest that Christ’s bodily suffering was external to the real event of redemption, which would distort the Christian message subsequently:

When we say that we have been redeemed through the blood of Christ, through Christ’s death, through his sufferings on the cross, then we must not mean by this that a spiritual event of love and obedience was unfortunately or strangely accompanied by rather unpleasant circumstances. (That has been a danger in standard Catholic scholastic theology ever since the Middle Ages.) We must not consider that it was really a matter of chance or externals, which has nothing to do with what was really intended, nothing to do with the obedience and love of this incarnate Word of the Father’s. The statement that we have been redeemed through the death of this Son of God, and through the shedding of his blood (i.e. a bodily event [*ein leibhaftiges Vorkommen*]) is the concrete, bodily [*leibhaftige Konkretheit*] form of what we express in abstract and formalized terms, as it were, when we merely say that we have been redeemed through the Son’s obedience and love, and his readiness to sacrifice himself.<sup>763</sup>

The redemption brought about by Christ was not only spiritually free but also materially real and personal. It occurred in and through his bodily existence, in his historical death, and in the shedding of his blood, “in this entirely concrete, bloody reality, given over to death.”<sup>764</sup>

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762. Rahner, “Der Leib in der Heilsordnung,” 163; “The Body in the Order of Salvation,” 75.

763. Rahner, “Der Leib in der Heilsordnung,” 163; “The Body in the Order of Salvation,” 76.

764. Rahner, “Der Leib in der Heilsordnung,” 163; “The Body in the Order of Salvation,” 76.

Thus, Christ did not redeem us “despite” his flesh but “through” it. The bodily dimension of his death is itself the redemptive act.

Moreover, this bodily redemption, for Rahner, is possible because we, as human beings, belong to the same bodily order as Christ. As members of the one human family, we share a common history and destiny that stretches back to Adam. We can be saved by Christ’s death precisely because his body is of the same kind as ours and because we participate in a bodily solidarity that binds all humanity together. Had the Logos become an angel, Rahner suggests, he could still have loved and obeyed God, but he could not have redeemed us, for angels do not share the bodily and historical destiny of humanity:

Let us suppose for a moment—in a kind of hypothetical theology—that the Logos had become an angel. He could then also, of course, have loved God, have trusted him, have obeyed him in this angelic, created and creaturely nature; but he could not have redeemed us through it. This event would not be one which would by its nature take place in a dimension which touches us from the very beginning. In other words, we have been redeemed through Christ’s suffering and death, because this event by its nature, as a redemptive act, took place in an actual bodily existence; and we were able to be redeemed through this bodily event, because what takes place in this sphere is from the outset a *patrimonium commune*, a common heritage for all those who belong to one another in this community of the body, this blood-relationship which binds them in Adam to a common destiny.<sup>765</sup>

Christ’s passion is redemptive not only because it is the supreme act of obedience and love, but because it took place in a real human body, within the shared bodily and historical condition of all humanity. Rahner’s views echo Tertullian’s “the flesh is the hinge of salvation” (*caro cardo salutis*). The body, in this view, is the very medium through which salvation is accomplished.<sup>766</sup>

The sixth fundamental truth is “the resurrection of the flesh [*Auferstehung des Fleisches*].”<sup>767</sup> Rahner affirms that one of the central articles of Christian faith is the

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765. Rahner, “Der Leib in der Heilsordnung,” 163–164; “The Body in the Order of Salvation,” 76–77.

766. See Rahner, “The Body in the Order of Salvation,” 77.

767. Rahner, “Der Leib in der Heilsordnung,” 164; “The Body in the Order of Salvation,” 77.

“resurrection of the flesh”—not merely the “resurrection of the body.” While the Church has used both expressions interchangeably, Rahner emphasizes that “resurrection of the flesh” more adequately captures the depth and unity of Christian anthropology in eschatological perspective. In biblical thought, “flesh” (*sarx*) does not refer simply to physical matter or the body in isolation; rather, it signifies the whole human person in their concrete material, spiritual, finite, and embodied creatureliness (*Leiblichkeit*):

But the resurrection of the flesh is the statement which means precisely body and soul, in that very unity in which man is flesh. For if he were simply body, then he would not be flesh at all in the Biblical sense. Flesh means that person who is on the one hand the frailty, the threatenedness, the inexplicableness, the weakness, the obscurity of this individual, concrete, specific entity, and who at the same time knows this and is afraid. In other words, flesh means the one person—it is almost impossible to say ‘who is made up of spirit and flesh’.<sup>768</sup>

Flesh does not refer merely to the physical body (*Körperlichkeit*) but to the whole human being in their fragile, historical, and embodied existence. Flesh signifies the unity of matter and spirit. It includes not only our physical limitations but also our spiritual awareness of them. Therefore, when we speak of the resurrection of the flesh, we affirm the resurrection of the entire person in their concrete embodied unity—not just a soul or a body, but the full material and spiritual unity that constitutes a human being.

Rahner argues that while theological expressions describing the human person, such as “spirit and flesh” or “body and soul,” are not incorrect, they risk obscuring the original unity of the human person. Christianity does not proclaim the resurrection of only one part of the person; it affirms the resurrection of the whole person in their full material and spiritual unity.<sup>769</sup> In this way, the confession of the resurrection of the flesh becomes the clearest expression of Christian hope: that the total person, in the plural or integrated unity of their bodily, spiritual, and historical dimensions (*Leiblichkeit*), is the complete human being

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768. Rahner, “Der Leib in der Heilsordnung,” 164; “The Body in the Order of Salvation,” 77.

769. See Rahner, “The Body in the Order of Salvation,” 78.

destined for salvation and eternal life in God.<sup>770</sup>

The seventh foundational truth about the body is that “the human person is a unity made up of body and soul [*Einheit des Menschen aus Leib und Seele*].”<sup>771</sup> This truth arises from the Church’s teaching that the human being is a real substantial unity, not a composite of separable parts. Rahner stresses that Catholic doctrine does not merely claim that a person “has” a body and a soul, but that they exist as one single, indivisible reality.<sup>772</sup> This unity does not mean that body and soul are identical; the soul cannot be reduced to matter, nor the body deduced from the soul. For Rahner, while the Church has consistently affirmed the spiritual nature and immortality of the soul—most notably at the Fifth Lateran Council and in the declarations of the First Vatican Council—it has also defined the real and original unity of body and soul as an article of faith, particularly at the Council of Trent.<sup>773</sup>

Taken together, these foundational truths show that *Leiblichkeit*—the concrete, bodily dimension of human existence—is the indispensable starting point for Christian eschatology. The human body, in all its historicity, materiality, and relationality, is a God-created reality essential to what it means to be human. From creation to redemption, from the Incarnation to the resurrection, Rahner presents *Leiblichkeit* as the medium through which salvation history unfolds. Humanity is redeemed not by a purely spiritual act but through Christ’s bodily passion, precisely because we share a common, historical, and bodily existence with Christ. Likewise, the resurrection of the dead is not the mere continuation of a disembodied soul in eternity but the glorification of the whole person in the unity of body and soul.<sup>774</sup>

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770. See Rahner, “The Body in the Order of Salvation,” 78.

771. Rahner, “Der Leib in der Heilsordnung,” 165; “The Body in the Order of Salvation,” 78.

772. For further discussion, See also Phan, *Eternity in Time and Space*, 44–47.

773. See Rahner, “The Body in the Order of Salvation,” 78.

774. See also Rahner, *Foundations*, 431–34.

Eschatology, therefore, must begin not with abstract speculation about the fate of the soul in eternity, but with the concretely embodied human person as the very site and subject of God's saving action.

### 10.2.2. Bodiliness (*Leiblichkeit*) as Open System

In Rahner's theology, *Leiblichkeit* (bodiliness) is an open and dynamic category that intrinsically links the human person to the entire cosmos and beyond. From the outset, the world belongs to the human person by virtue of being embodied:

Through bodiliness the whole world belongs to me from the start, in everything that happens. Of course we must not get the impression in this connection that our body stops where our skin stops, as if we were a sack containing a number of different things, which clearly ceases to be what it is where its 'skin', the sacking, stops. No. Let us think in quite simple terms ... . In some sense we are an open system ... If there were no moon or no sun, our bodies would be different, too. In a certain sense – and I am exaggerating here, in order to make what I want to say clearer—we are all living in one and the same body—the world."<sup>775</sup>

The body, in this view, is not a closed vessel defined by the accidents and limitations of the skin, as if it were a sac enclosing and protecting an essential element; the spiritual soul.<sup>776</sup>

Rather, it is a material, spiritual, and relation open system, interwoven with the natural and cosmic forces that sustain it. Thus, even the natural elements, such as the sun, the moon, and the rhythms of the cosmos shape the biological structure and nature of human existence, showing that our reality is always a part of a greater interconnected whole. As Rahner puts it, "we are all living in one and the same body—the world itself [*Wohnen wir alle in dem einen selben Leib, der die Welt ist*]."<sup>777</sup>

Rahner interprets the cosmic interconnectedness of bodiliness as the condition for

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775. Rahner, "Der Leib in der Heilsordnung," 173; "The Body in the Order of Salvation," 87–88.

776. See Rahner, "The Body in the Order of Salvation," 87.

777. Rahner, "Der Leib in der Heilsordnung," 173; "The Body in the Order of Salvation," 87–88.

both humanity's solidarity in sin and its potential for redemption within the world. Because we share in the common body of the world, we can speak meaningfully of both our participation in original sin and the possibility of bodily redemption within it.<sup>778</sup>

Communication and communion between God and humanity occur only through human bodiliness and historicity, which together become the concrete setting for the human response to grace and participation in salvation history—a gift that can be accepted or rejected, loved or hated.<sup>779</sup>

Rahner extends the reality of *Leiblichkeit* into his wider eschatology, interpreting the end time as the radical transfiguration of embodied existence rather than the attainment of abstract states in an abstract mystical realm. According to him, the end time is, in essence, the radical transfiguration of the bodily dimension of human existence.<sup>780</sup> In this light, the resurrection of the body and the promise of a “new heaven” and a “new earth” are not about abstract spatial realms. Rather, the realities we name as “blessedness,” “heaven,” or “hell,” are existential states defined by each person's ultimate response to our shared, embodied existence.<sup>781</sup> The decisive difference lies in whether one accepts this common embodied destiny as the locus of eschatological fulfilment or rejects it—thereby turning the shared world of bodiliness either into a place of final blessedness or alienation. As Rahner writes, “Let us just ask ourselves whether what we call blessedness, heaven and hell, might not be thought of as being distinguished for us in a matchless way by the manner in which a

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778. See Rahner, “The Body in the Order of Salvation,” 88.

779. See Rahner, “The Body in the Order of Salvation,” 88. Cf. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/3, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1961), 868–74. For Barth, salvation is entirely a divine initiative and therefore a gift. He emphasizes the resurrection of Jesus, insisting that it is the decisive act of God which grounds the hope of human salvation as a wholly divine gift.

780. See Rahner, “The Body in the Order of Salvation,” 88.

781. See Rahner, “The Body in the Order of Salvation,” 88.

particular person accepts this common [bodily] reality.”<sup>782</sup>

Rahner emphasizes that human existence is always embodied within a shared material world, where the person is both active in self-expression and passive in receiving the actions of other humans and the existential conditions of life. Every human life unfolds in a shared world, a common material space which is the arena in which each person both acts and is acted upon. The human person is therefore both active and passive—actively shaping the world through personal self-expression, and passively receiving from it through the actions of others and the conditions of life. What one experiences as personal *Leiblichkeit* is always the unity of these two dimensions: the inner self-fulfilment expressed outwardly in one’s actions, and the influence of the world and others as it is received externally: “What one specifically experiences as oneself is always the unity of the act suffered, committed by everything towards one, and the self-fulfilment from within, which one actively expresses outwards.”<sup>783</sup>

Rahner further situates human embodiment within the broader history of creation, which moves toward its final transfiguration in God. Our embodied existence is part of a greater history moving toward a definitive transformation. This transformation will embrace both the human spirit as a free being-in-the-world and the material cosmos which belongs to the person as part of themselves.<sup>784</sup> For Rahner, such a vision raises decisive eschatological questions: How will I receive the final condition of my *Leiblichkeit*—this embodied, material reality that I am and share with others? Will I freely welcome it as the transfigured world to come, the space of redeemed and blessed existence in God? Or will I reject it, resisting the

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782. See Rahner, “The Body in the Order of Salvation,” 88.

783. Rahner, “The Body in the Order of Salvation,” 88.

784. Cf. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 258–64. Moltmann envisions resurrection as the transformation of all creation into God’s glory, emphasising its social and cosmic dimensions. While Rahner parallels this universal scope, he is more insistent on the resurrection of the concrete human subject as the ontological unity of body and soul situated in the world as the locus of their personal fulfilment in God.

grace of fulfilment, and thus experience it as what Scripture calls the fire of hell?<sup>785</sup>

In closing, Rahner's eschatology demonstrates that the final destiny of the human person cannot be conceived apart from *Leiblichkeit*. The resurrection of the body, the transfiguration of matter, and the concrete promise of a new heaven and earth, all testify that salvation is not the abandonment of embodied existence but its definitive fulfilment. The body is the concrete locus where the human spirit encounters God's self-communication in history. Bodiliness is therefore not incidental to eschatology but its very condition of possibility. Without *Leiblichkeit*, eschatological hope collapses either into disembodied spiritualism or into secular utopianism.

At the same time, Rahner's emphasis on bodiliness carries systematic consequences for Christian theology. His account of the resurrection of the flesh affirms the continuity of creation with its eschatological fulfilment, grounding a theological anthropology in which matter and spirit, history and eternity, remain inseparably united.<sup>786</sup> The eschatological "new heaven and new earth" are not other-worldly abstractions but the consummation of historicity and embodiment itself. This symbolic realism makes *Leiblichkeit* the hermeneutical principle through which Rahner interprets eschatological doctrine. Biblical apocalyptic imagery, in this view, is neither to be discarded as myth nor frozen into fictional literalism. Rather, these images must be understood as the symbolic disclosure of the final transfiguration historicity and human embodiment.

In this light, the central claim of this chapter emerges with clarity: *Leiblichkeit* is not a marginal theme in Rahner's eschatology but its foundational category. By locating resurrection, salvation, and the destiny of creation within the historical horizon of embodied existence, Rahner shows that eschatology is meaningful only when rooted in human

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785. See Rahner, "The Body in the Order of Salvation," 88. See also Phan, *Eternity in Time*, 55–58.

786. See also Peter C. Phan, "Eschatology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Rahner*, edited by Declan Marmion and Mary E. Hines (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 182–83.

bodiliness. The resurrection of the flesh, understood as the transformation of history and matter, reveals that human bodiliness is both the medium of grace and the horizon of its consummation. Thus Rahner's eschatology must be read as a theology of *Leiblichkeit*—a vision in which the body is the indispensable key to understanding the destiny of humanity and creation in God. As Rahner observes:

The body is therefore nothing other than the self-consummation of the spirit in space and time. But this self-consummation of everything except God is of such a kind that it is essentially ambiguous and takes place in a sphere of existence in which all men and women communicate with one another from the very beginning. In the narrower sense of the word, the body is that through which I fulfil myself in the one world in which all spiritual persons exist. And it is from this starting point that we should have to think through anew the individual and more specific features of a Christian view of the body.<sup>787</sup>

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787. Rahner, "Der Leib in der Heilsordnung," 174; "The Body in the Order of Salvation," 88–89.

## General Conclusion

This dissertation has undertaken a systematic exploration of *Leiblichkeit* (bodiliness) as the structuring principle and unifying category in the theology of Karl Rahner. Through close analysis of Rahner's primary writings and engagement with secondary scholarship, it has shown that bodiliness is not a marginal or optional theme, but a decisive horizon around which his reflections on spirituality, philosophy, and theology revolve. By focusing on the embodied dimension of human existence, Rahner understands divine revelation and grace as God's self-communication to the human person, encountered through historicity and human embodiment. This vision directly challenges dualisms that have long shaped Christian thought—spirit against matter, grace against nature, soul against body, divine against human, natural against supernatural. Against these separations, Rahner reclaims the concrete embodied existence of human beings as the privileged locus of revelation and grace, where God irrevocably binds Godself to humanity and to the history of the world.

The study has emerged from a lacuna in Rahner scholarship. While many interpreters have noted his emphasis on the categorial and historical dimensions of human experience, there has been no sustained treatment of *Leiblichkeit* as a central theological category in its own right. This dissertation has sought to fill that gap by demonstrating that Rahner's recurring concern with history and concreteness rests upon a deeper conviction: that the human person, as embodied spirit-in-world, is the constitutive category of his entire theological project.

The argument unfolded across Rahner's major fields of theological reflection. In Christology, the Incarnation (the Word made flesh) is the decisive event of divine revelation. In the concrete humanity of Jesus (the *Leiblichkeit* of Christ), God's divinity is definitively disclosed in unity with human nature. The Incarnation thus becomes the paradigmatic moment in which God enters history, sanctifying it from within and revealing that salvation is

mediated through human bodiliness and historicity. In theological anthropology, Rahner portrays the human person as an indivisible unity of matter and spirit. Against reductive views that imagine the human subject either as a disembodied soul or as a biological mechanism (*Körperlichkeit*), Rahner identifies bodiliness as the *Realsymbol* of the total person: the original unity of spirit and matter, intellect and sensibility. The human being is properly a “supernatural existential”—a bodily subject whose freedom and capacity for grace are always mediated through concrete historicity and oriented toward a supernatural destiny in God.

Rahner extends these insights into ecclesiology and spirituality. The Church, as the mystical Body of Christ, is not an abstract spiritual entity but an embodied community through which grace is mediated concretely in the world. Its juridical structures, sacramental rites, communal rituals, and even its frailties all belong to its *Leiblichkeit*, the tangible forms in which the risen Christ continues to speak, act, and heal humanity in history. In his reflections on spirituality, Rahner grounds mysticism not in flight from the world but in immersion within it. His Ignatian “mysticism of everyday life” insists that the ordinary rhythms of human existence—work, relationships, suffering, joy—are existential spaces of encounter with God. His retrieval of the “spiritual senses” in Origen and Bonaventure, and his reading of grace in Clement of Alexandria, show that mystical experience is possible only within the embodied conditions of human life.

Rahner’s eschatology affirms the enduring theological significance of the body. The resurrection of the flesh does not negate earthly existence but transforms and fulfils it. The resurrected or glorified body is not a wholly new substance detached from history, but the perfected continuation of the same embodied existence. Thus, the body is not a temporary vessel to be discarded, but an intrinsic dimension of the human person destined for eternal communion with God in the beatific vision.

Cumulatively, these findings confirm the central claim of this dissertation: *Leiblichkeit* is the fundamental axis that structures Rahner's reflections on Christian spirituality, philosophy, and theology. While this study has not exhausted Rahner's vast corpus, it has identified key texts and essays that establish bodiliness as a decisive interpretive key. Important areas remain unexplored in this study, particularly the treatment of *Leiblichkeit* in Rahner's pastoral, moral, and dogmatic writings. These include his reflections on the relationship between theology and science, the role of the laity and the everyday practice of faith in contemporary life, the future of the Church, ecclesiastical offices and officials, ecumenism, interreligious dialogue, inculturation, synodality, secularism, papal infallibility, and the relationship between theology and dogma. Such writings address the concrete life of faith within the wider context of society. Indeed, Rahner developed a theology attentive to nearly every aspect of human existence—sleep, work, eating, old age, politics, peace, moral decision-making, and more—where *Leiblichkeit* is expressed in a practical and immediate form. A truly exhaustive treatment of bodiliness across Rahner's vast corpus would be far beyond the scope of this study. Nonetheless, his pastoral, moral, and dogmatic theology remains a fertile ground for future research.

The significance of *Leiblichkeit* reaches beyond academic theology. It challenges disembodied frameworks by offering a holistic vision of the human person as an embodied spiritual subject. It finds resonance with developments in the cognitive sciences, phenomenology, anthropology, and sociology, which increasingly stress the constitutive role of embodiment in identity, memory, and consciousness.<sup>788</sup> Rahner's emphasis anticipates and

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788. Wolputte's essay on the evolving anthropological perspectives on human bodiliness offers a multidisciplinary exploration of the human person as an embodied subject in the world. A Rahnerian theology of the body can serve as a fruitful complement to such studies, enriching anthropological, philosophical, psychological, and sociological insights with a theological account of human embodiment. For further discussion, see Steven Van Wolputte, "Hang on to Your Self: Of Bodies, Embodiment, and Selves," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 33 (2004): 251–269, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25064853>. In the same vein, see also Sigrid Müller, Slavomir Dluogo, and Gerhard Marschütz, eds., *Exploring the Boundaries of Bodiliness: Theological and Interdisciplinary Approaches to the Human Condition*, *Wiener Forum für Theologie und Religionswissenschaft*, vol. 9 (Vienna: Vienna University Press, 2013).

complements these insights, affirming that bodiliness is essential to what it means to be human. In a cultural context marked by contested and shifting understandings of the human person, Rahner's theology offers a coherent framework for interdisciplinary dialogue—addressing questions such as gender equality, bodily autonomy, technology, ecology, racial and social injustice, and political and religious responsibility.

This study contributes to Rahner scholarship while opening several avenues for further research. It retrieves an underexplored theme in Rahner scholarship by demonstrating that *Leiblichkeit* (bodiliness) functions as a central unifying category in his entire theological project. In doing so, it presents an integrated reading of Rahner's spirituality, philosophy, and theology, showing how bodiliness unites seemingly disparate themes into a coherent whole. Beyond this retrieval, the study highlights new possibilities for interdisciplinary engagement, drawing Rahner's thought into dialogue with fields such as bioethics, feminist theory, liberation theology, and related inquiries in gender identity, sociology, and anthropology.<sup>789</sup> It also situates Rahner's insights in possible dialogue with other traditions that emphasize embodiment, including the *theosis* tradition in Eastern Orthodoxy, the Ubuntu philosophy of Africa, which locates personhood in embodied communal interdependence, and Asian traditions such as Advaita Vedānta (with its affirmation of *tat tvam asi*), Buddhist *kāyānupassanā*, and Confucian anthropology, each of which connects the bodily and

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789. In *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Rahner* (2005), Gaspar Martínez, Nancy A. Dallavalle, and Michael Purcell set their readings of Rahner in dialogue with liberative, feminist, and post-modern approaches. Martínez highlights how Rahner's transcendental theology functions as a point of departure for political and liberation theologies (Martínez, "Political and Liberation Theologies," 249–63). Dallavalle shows how Rahner's anthropology of grace and his emphasis on mystery provide fertile resources for feminist theological reflection (Dallavalle, "Feminist Theologies," 264–78). Purcell, for his part, explores how Rahner's method can be reinterpreted through post-modern concerns with alterity, fragmentation, and excess (Purcell, "Rahner amid Modernity and Post-Modernity," 195–210). Such conversations could be extended into other interdisciplinary approaches—for example, engaging Rahner's theology with post-colonial studies, queer theology, ecological theology, justice and peace-building. For further discussion on the pastoral relevance of Rahner's theology and its possible openings for dialogue with other sciences, see Karl Kardinal Lehmann, "Karl Rahner und die Praktische Theologie," *Zeitschrift für katholische Theologie* 126, no. 1/2 (2004): 3–15, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24170751>

relational conditions of existence to individual and communitarian spirituality.

Practical theology and pastoral care also stand to benefit from a deeper appropriation of Rahner's vision of bodiliness, particularly in liturgical contexts, in health and end-of-life care, and in the lived rhythms of daily Christian discipleship.<sup>790</sup> Finally, in a cultural moment increasingly shaped by artificial intelligence (AI), biotechnology, and transhumanist ideals, Rahner's theology of *Leiblichkeit* provides a necessary counter-voice to technocratic visions of humanity that risk neglecting the spiritual value and significance of human embodiment, historicity, and finitude.<sup>791</sup>

In the end, Rahner's vision of *Leiblichkeit* reclaims the human body not as a problem to overcome but as the privileged locus of grace. In the Word made flesh, eternity enters time; infinite love is mediated through finite historicity; the divine embraces the human in its embodied reality. To be human, for Rahner, is to be a bodily spirit already standing within the horizon of God's self-communication. The body is the medium through which the person loves, suffers, hopes, relates, and ultimately encounters the incomprehensible mystery of

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790. Although rooted in a Western European context, Rahner's theology remains of lasting significance for Christianity worldwide. Albert Raffelt, in his reflection on Rahner's intellectual legacy through the *Sämtliche Werke* (Complete Works), asks whether Rahner's theology should be understood as a regional product of German-speaking Catholicism or as a contribution to the universal Church. He argues that Rahner cannot be reduced to reductive judgements that portray him as overly academic or insufficiently biblical, since the *Sämtliche Werke* reveal a theology marked by dialogue with Scripture and Tradition, engagement with philosophy and science, and attentiveness to pastoral and societal concerns. This study's focus on *Leiblichkeit* confirms Raffelt's insight: it is precisely Rahner's contextual and embodied theology that secures his continuing relevance for the universal Church. For further discussion, see Albert Raffelt, "Regionale Theologie oder Theologie für die Weltkirche? Überlegungen anhand der Edition der Sämtlichen Werke Karl Rahners," in *Patria e Umanità: Scritti in onore del Card. Walter Kasper*, ed. Antonio Russo and Johannes Singhammer (San Cesario di Lecce: Pensa Editore, 2023), 333–56.

791. Philip Endean shows that, when read rightly, Rahner's theology can move beyond scholasticism into practical and secular discernment, relocating concrete human experience as a genuine locus of grace and thus anticipating fruitful engagements with post-modern and contemporary concerns. He emphasizes that certainty remains God's—so theology proceeds as a *reductio in mysterium*—yet this very stance warrants rigorous dialogue with post-modern forms of knowledge and life. For further discussion, see Philip Endean, "Has Rahnerian Theology a Future?" in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Rahner*, ed. Declan Marmion and Mary E. Hines (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 281–96. In the same way, Rahner's theology of *Leiblichkeit* can be brought into dialogue with contemporary pastoral and secular issues that risk neglecting the spiritual meaning of embodiment, historicity, and finitude—for example, artificial intelligence and transhumanist projects—thereby showing how Rahner's vision can guide the limits of progress, deepen respect for human dignity, and safeguard hope in a technologically driven future.

God—now in history and finally in the beatific vision. In affirming bodiliness as the ground of theology, this study offers a lasting Rahnerian insight: embodiment is not an obstacle to divine life, but its very condition and promise. Thus, *Leiblichkeit* is not simply one theme among others in Rahner's work but the foundational category for interpreting his spirituality, philosophy, and theology as a coherent whole.

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