

Belief, Unbelief and Mystery  
Karen Kilby

This paper will operate on two levels--as an exploration of a question, and as the recommendation of attention to a figure. The question is this: against the backdrop of its own diminishment, how should the church understand the difference between belief and unbelief, and so understand itself and its difference from the surrounding culture? ? The thinker to be commended is Karl Rahner: I want to propose that we can usefully—and freshly-- think about such issues through an engagement with Rahner.

Nearly every component of the previous paragraph may raise doubts. Should one really speak of a diminishment of the church? In many parts of the world Christianity is thriving, and in some of its expressions even in this part of the world it is flourishing. Secondly, even if one accepts that some expressions of the church in our time are diminishing, it is not clear whether this has any significance for a theologian. What relevance can the sociological fact of getting smaller have to a theological reflection on anything whatsoever, including the relation of belief to unbelief? Theology is not, surely, a matter of statistics. And thirdly, Rahner. Hasn't he been digested, dated and dismissed? Everyone knows, surely, what is wrong with his theory of anonymous Christianity. Indeed, a task many theologians routinely give their undergraduate students is to sniff out the patronizing arrogance lying behind the apparent liberality of this 'inclusivist' position.

I will return to the notion of diminishment below, but I want to begin with a few comments about the reception of Rahner. The identification of Rahner's theology with the theory of anonymous Christianity is a mistake, in my view, as is also the identification of this theory with 'inclusivism'. That these are mistakes will be argued in Section II of this paper. But there is another question, as to *how* the mistakes came to be made, or rather how these particular mistakes became so pervasive. Part of the answer, I want to propose, lies in the dynamics of ecumenical engagement—Anglican and Protestant engagement, in particular—with twentieth century Roman Catholic theology.

Ecumenical engagement, it is widely agreed, is to be admired: the young scholar makes a choice to invest time and effort in developing a sympathetic understanding of the thought of another tradition. The hope is to be enriched from the other, and also to do one's bit for the cause of ecclesial rapprochement. It is, fundamentally, a generous impulse: we know this, and so we see ecumenical engagement as valuable and praiseworthy. What is easier to miss, however, are some of the possible political consequences—consequences for the *other's* tradition, the tradition one is studying—of such an exercise in generosity.

If I determine I want to learn from another tradition, I have to decide to which voice or voices within it I will listen, which voices represent the other tradition most fully or authentically. For I will not have time to grapple with the whole range of what is available—after all, it is not *my* tradition. What then shapes the decision to engage with one portion rather than another of the target tradition? Most obviously, a young scholar will be likely to opt for someone they have heard about, someone that the important people in their own world are already talking about. So, first of all, there is likely to be a clustering effect. Beyond this, there may be an inclination to choose that which seems most exotic, most different from what I am used to, but which also, perhaps, conforms to a pre-existing sense I might have of the 'otherness' of the other. In this case, furthermore, ecumenical generosity

will mean that in the vicinity of anything I associate with the ‘otherness’ of the other, I should be slow to criticize.

In the context of Protestant and Anglican engagements with 20<sup>th</sup> century Roman Catholic thought, more concretely, there has tended, after some initially broader reconnaissance missions, to be a clustering around de Lubac and especially Hans Urs von Balthasar, and a move *away* from any real engagement with Rahner. And I think there has been a sense that if one approaches a Catholic figure in a spirit of ecumenical generosity, there are dimensions of their thought about which one deliberately refrains from critique, or at least to which one significantly softens one’s critical response—dimensions around, for instance, gender, sexuality and authority. What is the point of trying to be ecumenically engaged if one is just going to make a fuss about what everyone already knew in advance was different about Catholics? So figures associated with the journal *Communio*, and particularly Balthasar, have been embraced with some enthusiasm by ecumenically generous Protestants and Anglicans *in spite of* attitudes towards authority and gender; and this has happened during roughly the same period that such figures have been embraced and promoted by ecclesially conservative elements within Catholicism at least in part *because* of their attitudes towards authority and gender.

The combined effect of these two forces—that of ecclesially conservative Catholics and ecumenically generous non-Catholics—has been to give the impression in many circles that the exciting, deep and distinctive thing available in Catholic theology of the last century or so is to be found in Hans Urs von Balthasar and the *Communio* theologians, and that Rahner turns out to have been a passing fad. [Not in all circles, by any means, but in many circles, and in circles which, I suspect, may overlap quite substantially with academic colleagues in Theology or Philosophy of Religion.]

It is because of this sense of something out of balance-- this sense that a misleading theological stereotype has held too many in its grip for too long-- that I am hoping to reopen the question of Rahner. The argument that follows falls into three parts. I will, first of all, take Rahner’s *The Shape of the Church to Come* as a jumping off point for thinking about the context of ecclesial diminishment, and the appropriate response to it on the part of believers. This first section is not then directly about the relation of belief to unbelief, but about the context within which we think about this relation. In a second section, I will consider the notorious concept of the anonymous Christian. It has been read through a distorting lens, and has also itself *become* a distorting lens through which to read Rahner’s theology. Nevertheless, it does represent one element in Rahner’s thinking around belief and unbelief, and I will suggest that as a modest proposal in this area it is at least partly helpful. In the final section I will turn to an essay which is much closer to the heart of Rahner’s theology, ‘The Concept of Mystery in Catholic Theology’<sup>1</sup>. This is an essay which exhibits the profoundly apophatic cast of Rahner’s thought together with his instinct to seek the unity and simplicity of the faith. The question I want to begin to explore is what these things mean—the apophaticism, the search for simplicity—about the difference between belief and unbelief. If we focus on the very heart of the Christian faith, and at this heart we

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<sup>1</sup> I find it helpful to think of Rahner’s theology, not quite as a circle with this essay at its centre, but as an ellipse with this essay and one other, ‘The Theology of the Symbol’ (1974b, pp 221-52)), as its twin foci. From a pedagogical point of view, rather than introducing Rahner to students through the essays on anonymous Christianity and --for those wanting a more sustained engagement-- the *Foundations of the Christian Faith*, it is better I believe to begin with Rahner’s literary-theological prayers in *Encounters with Silence*, and then, for those who want a more sustained engagement, offer the challenge of these two focal essays.

find mystery, what must we conclude about the relation between belief and unbelief? Has the difference been collapsed? Must we therefore turn away from such an apophatic theological approach?

I

*The Shape of the Church to Come*<sup>2</sup> was published in 1972, and written in the context of, and for the sake of, a Synod of the German church which ran from 1971-75. This is by no means Rahner's most serious work of theology: it is composed of a series of short, sketchy chapters, and tosses off analyses, proposals and criticisms at great speed.<sup>3</sup> Its goal is to propose something like a unifying vision to this particular Synod, a vision both of where the Catholic Church in Germany currently is, and of where it should try to go.<sup>4</sup>

The German Synod took place, of course, in the wake of the Second Vatican Council, the final session of which had come to a close just six years earlier. Rahner's stance towards Vatican II is interesting. In our own times, the Council, whether as event, or as set of documents, or both, has taken on the status of the central item to be interpreted and fought over in Catholic circles; it is that to which one goes back and claims in one way or another for one's own or for one's party. There is no sign of this, however, in Rahner in the early 70s. He grants that the Council was an important thing, which 'ought not to be depreciated either from the Right or from the Left' (1974a: 13), but it was just too general to be of much use—or at least, of much use as the German Church considered its concrete future. Furthermore, much of Vatican II, Rahner wrote in 1972, was already dated.<sup>5</sup> While he is keen that the Church should avoid 'a very dubious conservatism, which is becoming virulent as the euphoria of Vatican II is fading' (1974a: 27), his proposed alternative is not that it wrap itself up in the mantle of the Council, but instead that it try to take a serious look at the reality in which it finds itself, and make genuine decisions about how to respond.<sup>6</sup>

What is that reality? The Church in Germany, Rahner suggests, is at the start of a period of transition, the transition from a '*Volkskirche*', a church 'sustained by a homogeneously Christian society and almost identical with it' (1974a: 24) to something

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<sup>2</sup> The English translation's title is catchier, if less indicative of the actual aim of the book, than the original: *Strukturwandel der Kirche also Aufgabe und Chance*.

<sup>3</sup> Rahner had just retired from his teaching role in Münster, and it might be tempting to see the loose, relaxed quality of this book as a consequence of the new freedom brought by retirement. On the other hand, throughout his career Rahner wrote in quite a variety of styles and for a variety of purposes.

<sup>4</sup> Rahner describes what he is offering in more modest language—he is trying to present 'preliminary considerations on a basic concept for the synod' (1974a: 15).

<sup>5</sup> '...in the positive decisions of the Council, if we look at them quite coolly, there is much that is already obsolete.' Rahner goes on to say that the Synod can't rely too heavily for concrete guidance on Vatican II since 'Many of the council's statements simply express the Christian faith and that, often enough, in the light of presuppositions and horizons of understanding which cannot simply be regarded as those of today or tomorrow' (1974a: 13).

<sup>6</sup> It is probably not unreasonable to see some Ignatian influence in *The Shape of the Church to Come*. The German Church needs to make concrete decisions, it needs to undergo a process of discernment of God's will and the decision to go forward, a discernment which cannot just proceed from general theological principles, general truths of the faith. This is one reason why simply looking back to Council documents is not very helpful. (Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556) was the founder of the Society of Jesus, the Jesuit order, to which Rahner belonged. The spiritual tradition which is derived from his writings has a focus on the discernment of God's will and the making of concrete decisions).

much smaller, a Church formed of individuals who have taken an explicit decision of faith *against* the grain of the wider culture. During the period of transition, both kinds of church will exist alongside one another—the church will be a church of ‘non-simultaneity’. The leadership of the Church has a choice, then, either to see the change that is coming about, and really grapple with it, or to continue tending to the ‘remnants’ of *Volkskirche*, ‘resisting decisions in favour of the future until they are extorted from it, running groaning behind developments instead of leading’ (1974a:50).

I will not attempt, within the confines of this essay, to give a full summary of Rahner’s description of the state of the church, and of his proposals for a vision of its future. There are passages within the text which allow glimpses into the particular political dynamics at the moment of writing,<sup>7</sup> and others which, from the perspective of more than half a century on, can seem striking in their predictive power. An example of the latter is Rahner’s account of the coming diminishment of the German Catholic Church, a diminishment both in the number of practicing Catholics, and in the number of those who are nominal church members. Of the latter group he writes, for instance,

However unpleasant it may be, we must allow for the fact that social conditions in the long or short run may be so transformed (whatever the cause of this may be) that civic respectability and normality will no longer require a person to be a baptized Christian, to pay church-tax, or send his children to denominational religious instruction, to add a religious touch to marriages and funerals, that it will soon be no longer socially out of place or damaging to withdraw officially from the Church (1974a: 30-31)

The change he thinks is coming need not be driven by anything dramatic, by any ‘striking political upheavals’:

in our modern society there are plenty of causes leading slowly and unobtrusively to such a situation, so that only a single occasion—perhaps insignificant in itself—is necessary to let loose a rapid and numerically very great falling away from the Church. (1974a:31)

Rahner is not here precisely forecasting the sex abuse crisis, but he does seem to anticipate that *an* unpredictable event would play something very like the role in the Church’s on-going loss of power, prestige and respectability that it has played.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Rahner is clearly worried, for instance, about the behaviour of the bishops, who have been announcing their own unified view at the openings of discussions. ‘But the bishops—we hope—will deny that they want to form a solid group at the synod. And it is to be hoped that this assurance will become clearer in the course of the synod than it has been hitherto. For it would indeed be odd if all the bishops were of one opinion in all individual questions, even those of slight importance. For if their opinion were *a priori* correct, the synod could be dissolved at once and all decisions could be left to the bishops. But if we assume that this uniform opinion is not necessarily right in regard to the matter under consideration, then it is surprising it turns out to be so uniform’ (1974a:13).

<sup>8</sup> Similarly striking are some of Rahner’s suggestions for the way authority ought to be exercised in the Church to come. These might be read as an advance portrait of the style of Pope Francis: ‘In the future questions or doubts about office will no longer be effectively dismissed by appealing to the formal authority of office, but only by furnishing proof of a genuinely Christian spirit on the part of the office-holder himself. He will gain recognition for his office by being genuinely human and a Spirit-filled Christian, one whom the Spirit has freed for unselfish service in the exercise of his social function in the Church....All the ceremony which distinguishes the office-holder even in the most ordinary circumstances from the mass of the people and other Christians and which has nothing to do with exercise of his office and stresses his dignity where it is out of place, might well disappear....’

In any case, what I find the most striking in Rahner is not the accuracy of his prediction of a diminishment to come, but the *calmness* with which he makes the prediction. There is no sense of hand-wringing. There is no anxiety to apportion blame—on failures in church strategy, or the evils of modernity, or anywhere else. Even more striking, there is no proposal of a strategy to ward off the coming diminishment—no suggesting that if only we get our theology right, or our liturgy, or our approach to mission, we'll be in a position to stop and reverse the slippage. There is an acceptance that things happen for reasons which at least in part are much larger than anything the Church can control. There are things he thinks the Church should do differently because of the situation, ways it can aim to fulfill its mission more fully within it, but the recommendations are not predicated on supposing the situation itself can be prevented or reversed.

It follows from what Rahner lays out—even if this is not something he himself develops as much as he might—that one entirely appropriate, entirely reasonable, response to the situation he describes in Germany—and by extension, we might say, in much of Europe—is sadness. Something is in decline; something is being lost. Not everywhere in the world, of course. And even in Europe, it may not be in *all* its forms that Christianity has been in diminishment. Indeed, even where churches are numerically in diminishment, even in the Roman Catholicism and the older Protestant traditions of the West, there are also signs of vitality, of new life. Nevertheless, in a fairly short period of time there has been—and continues to be—a very major decline. This means that there will be many in this generation, and in generations to come, for whom Christianity will not be a live option, while it would have been, had they been born a generation or two earlier. There will be things the churches as a result cannot do, contributions they cannot make, positive influence they cannot have, creative possibilities they will not fulfil.

That a proper response to church decline—or even one *dimension* of a proper response—might be sadness and a sense of loss is not often articulated by theologians. Attention is usually focused in one of two other directions. One possibility is to offer a diagnosis of what has gone wrong, and a cure: the problem lies in the wrong path taken at the time of Kant or Schleiermacher or Duns Scotus or some other figure, or maybe the problem lies in the fact that Church and theology have not kept up with changes in the culture around us; the cure will be a retrieval of a way of thought that preceded Scotus or Kant or Schleiermacher or someone else, or else it lies in being a bit smarter in keeping up with shifts in the world. The other familiar theological response is to *embrace* the decline as fundamentally, actually, a good thing. It is not loss at all, but gain. The Church is finally escaping its long captivity to Constantinianism, finally becoming free to be itself more fully and truly. We should not be seeking power, influence and prestige anyways; losing it is a blessing, which frees us to offer a more faithful witness.

Some narratives of decline are interesting, and the work of retrieval is valuable. But to suppose that if only we get our theology right, all shall be well and historic ecclesial declines will be reversed, seems to put ourselves, as theologians, too decisively at the

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No damage is done to office or office-holders if the latter honestly admit uncertainties, doubts, the need to experiment and further reflection, without knowing the outcome, and don't behave as if they had a direct hot line to heaven to obtain an answer to each and every question in the Church'. (1974a: 58-9). The encouragement to the bishops of the German synod not to always necessarily agree with each other, mentioned in footnote 6, also foreshadows Francis' attempts to change bishops' behavior at recent synods in Rome.

centre of the story. And again, however significant the critique of Constantinianism, this is not enough to make church decline into a story of pure gain. Some of what we had may not have been so good as we thought it was; the Churches may have been compromised and corrupted by their alignment with establishment and political power; but from this I don't think we are entitled to conclude that what has been and is being lost is *only* the corruption and collusion, that which needed to be purged.

But is it not a tenet of Christian faith that the Holy Spirit is at work in the Church, that the Spirit will not abandon the Church? And what about the role of Providence? And what about hope? None of these commitments, I'd like to suggest—to the role of the Spirit in the Church, to the role of providence, to hope—rule out the possibility of losses which are genuine loss, and over which it is possible to mourn. When a person dies, it *may* be that it is their fault—they smoked and ate too much and exercised too little; and it *may* be that they have accomplished all they could in life, fulfilled their potential and given all they had to give. But neither of these things is necessarily the case: a person may die through no fault of their own, and a person may die while still in their prime, vocation unfulfilled. By analogy, I think, we should be able to say that something in the Church—some version of church, some dynamism, some institutional presence— can come to an end, or be severely diminished, through no fault of its own (or not *only* through its own fault), but at least in part because of larger forces beyond its control; and this may happen *even if* there was something good and valuable and necessary in this expression of the church. The fact that it can diminish and die shouldn't be taken as proof that it never was worthwhile, or that it is no longer needed. It may be proof of nothing more than that there are broader social causes 'leading slowly and unobtrusively' in a certain direction.

Mourning, sadness, loss: none of these can be the last word in Christian theology. But without acknowledging that a loss really is a loss, that diminishment is not, in itself, a good, we may distort our capacity to think well. Without some recognition that these words capture something of the church's situation *now*, even if we don't believe they capture its very deepest truth or its final meaning—without this, there is a danger that an anxious nostalgia or a pugnacious self-assertion shapes our thought in general, and especially our thought about the relationship of belief to unbelief.

## II

Rahner's famous theory of 'the anonymous Christian' has an obvious bearing on the question of the relation of belief to unbelief, and it is also related to the sidelining and dismissal of Rahner as a theologian from whom our own generation can learn. For both these reasons it is worth considering, at least briefly, here.<sup>9</sup>

It is important to be clear that the theory of the anonymous Christian is not the *telos* of Rahner's oeuvre, that towards which the theology more broadly is directed. It is a phrase mentioned here and there in his writings, and to which a couple of relatively slender articles are devoted. There are links, of course, between the theory and some of the broader,

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<sup>9</sup> I will not present an exposition of the theory here, or any outline of the ways in which it has been criticised. This is both because I presume this to be one bit of Rahner to which many people with a theological education *do* already have some (even if skewed) introduction, and because I want to avoid repeating myself. For discussions of anonymous Christianity and evaluations of some of the common criticisms, cf. (Kilby 2007: 30-37) and (Kilby 2004: 115-126). Many others have written on this: one of the most thorough treatments can be found in (Conway: 1993). See also the historical work done by Stephen Bullivant, discussed below.

central themes in his theology, but the ‘anonymous Christian’ notion is neither the lynchpin nor the culmination of his thought.

Stephen Bullivant has done illuminating work tracing the history of the usage of this particular term in mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Catholic circles. Rahner first used the phrase, incidentally and in passing, in 1960 and 1961. What solidified it for him, turning it into a topic for consideration in its own right, was a book published by Anita Röper in 1963 entitled *The Anonymous Christian*. His own most famous (9 page) article on the theme, then, in *Theological Investigations 6*, was a revised version of his radio review of her book (Bullivant 2012: 86)

Meanwhile, both the phrase itself and a set of very similar ideas were swirling around among a range of Catholic thinkers of the time. Bullivant makes this point elegantly: it is true that the critics of the idea of anonymous Christianity are ‘a “Who’s Who” of Catholic theology’—Congar, de Lubac, Schillebeeckx, Balthasar, Küng, Ratzinger—but it is also the case that *every one* of these critics had, ‘at one time or another, affirmed the existence of an “implicit,” “anonymous,” “unconscious,” “secret,” or “hidden” faith as the means by which conscious nonChristians can be saved’ (Bullivant 2010: 339, 341).<sup>10</sup> Schillebeeckx in fact, Bullivant argues, arrived at the precise phrase ‘anonymous Christians’ independently of Rahner, and may well have been the first to coin it.

What caused the idea to become associated with Rahner in particular, and repudiated by all the others? It was, Bullivant argues, Hans Urs von Balthasar’s 1966 book, *Cordula oder der Ernstfall*,<sup>11</sup> a work which is a potent—and manifestly successful—mix of theology, polemic and satire. Balthasar both singled out the theory of anonymous Christianity for particular scorn, and attached it firmly to Rahner. Before then, it had been an idea that was in the air, widely subscribed to in one form or another, attributed to Rahner and Schillebeeckx equally, if attributed to anyone in particular. After *Cordula*, it belonged to Rahner alone, and was repudiated by all the others, Schillebeeckx included.

If Balthasar was a key agent, on the scene of European Catholicism, in pinning the idea of anonymous Christianity onto Rahner, Alan Race was a key agent, in the context of Anglophone theology, in identifying Rahner with anonymous Christianity. Rahner is presented as a paradigmatic ‘inclusivist’ within the exclusivism/inclusivism/pluralism typology Race introduced in 1983. This typology has been highly successful. Indeed, it is such an extraordinarily enticing framework that even those who think it has been debunked tend to continue to use it in teaching.

There are two reasons why ‘inclusivism’ is not a good category within which to place Rahner. One is that, as Gavin D’Costa’s work makes clear, inclusivism is not a good category for anyone. Rahner is actually an exclusivist, according to D’Costa, as is everyone from the Dalai Lama to John Hick (D’Costa 2000: 91). The other, and perhaps more important, reason ‘inclusivism’ is a misleading category is that it creates the impression that Rahner’s purpose in doing theology is to make a contribution to the theology of religions, and so frames his work in a highly misleading way. Rahner had central concerns in the theology of grace, in theological anthropology, in Christology, in ecclesiology, in the doctrine of the Trinity, and so on, but he was not any sort of specialist in the theology of religions, nor did he take his starting point from its questions. It is true that where he ends up in the theory of the

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<sup>10</sup> Bullivant also extends the list beyond those who actually criticised Rahner on this score, to include Maritain, Danielou and Adam.

<sup>11</sup> The English title is *The Moment of Christian Witness*.

anonymous Christian has implications for what can be said and thought by Christians about adherents of non-Christian religions, but this is, once again, closer to a side-effect of his theology than its focus or goal.<sup>12</sup>

It is no more true of Rahner's theology, then, to read it primarily through the category of inclusivism than it would be true to Karl Barth's to read it primarily through the category of exclusivism. Or, to change the point of comparison, just as Thomas Aquinas, for those who encounter him through the study of philosophy of religion, becomes over-identified with the Five Ways, so Rahner, for those who encounter him through the study of the theology of religions, becomes over-identified with the theory of the anonymous Christian. Nevertheless, for the purposes of this paper—for the purpose of addressing the relation of belief to unbelief, it does make sense to think at least a little with and about this theory.

I mentioned above Rahner's capacity calmly to accept the fact of the Church's diminishment. Is this belied by the theory of the anonymous Christian? Does the latter amount to an attempt to wish away the church's numerical losses, to do away with them, in fact, at the stroke of a pen? The Church is not shrinking at all, it turns out, if Rahner is right—we suddenly have grounds to announce that it is, to the contrary, bigger than ever before—or at least, than ever before supposed. Is there a kind of triumphalism, then, to the notion of anonymous Christianity?

I think the theory can indeed be read as a response to the church's diminishment, but not in a triumphalist manner. It is not a matter of finding a clever and duplicitous way to claim strength for one's position in the opinion polls, to persuade oneself and one's opponents that one is really, after all, winning. It *is* however an attempt to articulate how Christians themselves can live in a context where they find themselves increasingly in a minority, how they can live in this context without panic or despair, without a sense of embattlement, without developing a sectarian outlook-- how they can remain confident in God's grace and its power even as they see the society around them drift away from Christian commitment. Though my neighbours, my friends, my children, profess a different view of things, I do not have to suppose a huge gulf has opened up between me and them, that at the deepest level, where it matters most, we stand in a drastically different relationship to the love of God.

The theory of anonymous Christianity is one way, then, of affirming a solidarity, in spite of apparent dramatic difference, between believer and unbeliever—of affirming that unbelief need not be as far from belief as it can seem.<sup>13</sup> As a theological proposal, I do not want to suggest that this is *derived* from the context of ecclesial diminishment, but the context does have some role in prompting attention to the underlying issue. And as a theological proposal, I do not want to suggest that it is without fault—if nothing else, the use of the term 'anonymous' seems clearly unfortunate—but it needs to be seen as

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<sup>12</sup> One way to see that the theology of religions is not a driving force in Rahner's thought is to consider his essay 'The Christian Among Unbelieving Relations' (Rahner 1974c: 355-72), which is the best candidate for precursor to the 'Anonymous Christian' article in Volume 6 of the *Theological Investigations*. This is an essay motivated explicitly by concern for the pastoral care of Catholics whose family members 'lapse'—on what grounds might they be reassured that they need *not* suppose their children or spouses automatically damned?

<sup>13</sup> Strictly speaking, the gap between belief and unbelief may not be diminished on this view, but *placed* differently. Both professed believers and professed unbelievers may be anonymous atheists—since it is possible to refuse the offer of grace which is anonymously present in experience.

expressing one element in Rahner's theological reflection on the relation of belief to unbelief, rather than the very core of his intellectual project.

### III

So far, in the course of attempting to recommend Rahner as someone with whom to think, I have introduced one book which is sketchy, impressionistic and popular, and one theme from which, I have suggested, Rahner needs a degree of rescuing.<sup>14</sup> It seems appropriate to conclude, then, with something a little more intellectually and theologically weighty—even if, in this short essay, my own treatment of it will be sketchy.

'The Concept of Mystery in Catholic Theology' (Rahner 1974b: 36-73) is one of the richest, and by turns most dense and most beautiful, of Rahner's essays. It is something of a *tour de force*, weaving together, in the space of 40 pages, a critical account of the rationalism of the dominant neo-scholasticism of the period, a presentation of Rahner's own theological anthropology, including his understanding of the circuminsession of love and knowledge, an invocation of the tradition of mystical theology, an understanding of grace, Incarnation, beatific vision and the Trinity—offering a vision in fact of the ordering of the whole of theology, and its relationship to philosophy. There is a certain irony to the essay as well, though, because the dense and sophisticated presentation turns out to be all in aid of showing (as Rahner already indicates that he wants to do in a pastorally focused introduction) that in the end the Christian faith is something very *simple*. And it is in relation to this simple thing, with which the essay concludes, that we may want to ask, what might be the implications for the relation of belief to unbelief?

Rahner begins this essay with an account of the average, standard Catholic understanding of mystery at the time of writing, 'the notion of mystery understood in the schools' (38). He highlights three features of this understanding: first, that mystery is understood as a property of a *statement*, a proposition; secondly, that mystery is plural—there are a number of mysterious truths; and thirdly, that mystery is provisional. Feeding into all these is the presupposition that mystery is understood by contrast to *ratio*, and in particular by contrast to a conception of reason derived 'from the ideal of modern science' (40). Mysteries, on this understanding, are truths which 'cannot for the moment be raised to the level of perspicuous insight which is proper to the *ratio*' but, it seems to be presumed, these truths 'will be clarified later on and so finally be adequate to the demands made by human reason for insight and perspicuousness' (40).

Rahner proposes by contrast the possibility of a more positive, a more unified, and a less rationalistic conception of mystery. In particular, he reverses the relationship of *ratio* to mystery: mystery is not a deficiency in the rational perspicacity of something, a provisional imperfection in its knowability—instead, it is the 'preoccupation with the seemingly known and perspicuous [which] proves to be the provisional' (41)<sup>15</sup>. He invites us to consider the possibility that 'we must take mystery not as the provisional but as the primordial and permanent'. Readers will accept, he presumes, that God remains mysterious in the beatific vision<sup>16</sup>, and they should think about what this means :

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<sup>14</sup> Perhaps it would be more fair to say that it is some of Rahner's readers who need rescuing from excessive attention to the theme.

<sup>15</sup> I am oversimplifying a little here, because Rahner is doing a little more than simply flipping the *ratio*/mysterium relationship. Part of his project is to rescue the concept of reason itself-- of *ratio*-- from the narrow distortion into which 19<sup>th</sup> century conceptions of science had forced it.

<sup>16</sup> He refers to this as a 'doctrine obvious in itself and dogmatically assured' (Rahner 1974c: 41).

God remains incomprehensible, and the object of vision is precisely this incomprehensibility, which we may not therefore think of as a sort of regrettably permanent limitation of our blessed comprehension of God. It must rather be thought of as the very substance of our vision and the very object of our blissful love. In other words, if God is directly seen as the infinite and incomprehensible, and if the *visio beatifica* must then be the permanent presence of the inexpressible...vision must mean grasping and being grasped by the mystery, and the supreme act of knowledge is not the abolition or diminution of the mystery but its final assertion, its eternal and total immediacy. (41)

'The Concept of mystery' is divided into three lectures, of which the second is an unfolding of the central themes of Rahner's theological anthropology in relation to the concept of mystery. We are by our nature so constituted, Rahner believes, that a condition of the possibility of all our knowing and willing is a transcendence towards absolute being and God; the finite can only be known and willed against the backdrop of an infinite horizon. But this horizon, the infinity towards which we are always oriented in our relation to the finite, cannot be pinned down and described:

The horizon cannot be comprised within the horizon.... The ultimate measure cannot be measured; the boundary which limits all things cannot itself be bounded by a still more distant limit. The infinite and immense which comprises and *can* comprise all things, because it exists only as infinite distance behind which there is nothing, and in relation to which it is indeed meaningless to talk of 'nothingness': such an all-embracing immensity cannot itself be encompassed. So this nameless and indefinable being, distinguishing itself only by itself from all else, and thus holding all else at a distance, the norm of all complying with no norm distinct from itself, this Whither of transcendence is seen as absolutely beyond determination. (51)

The horizon, the 'Whither' of our transcendence, is God; and God, necessarily beyond determination, is rightly described as mystery, or indeed, Holy Mystery. When grace (and, by implication, for Rahner, revelation) are brought into the picture, everything does not suddenly become a lot clearer: 'Grace does not imply the promise and the beginning of the *elimination* of the mystery, but the radical possibility of the absolute *proximity* of the mystery' (55, emphasis added). And all this, however difficult to articulate, Rahner thinks, is on another level not difficult to understand at all:

Nothing is more familiar and obvious to the alerted spirit than the silent question which hovers over all that it has attained and mastered...In his heart of hearts, there is nothing man [sic] knows better than that his knowledge, ordinarily so-called, is only a tiny island in the immense ocean of the unexplored. He knows better than anything else that the existential question facing him in knowledge is whether he loves the little island of his so-called knowledge better than the ocean of the infinite mystery; whether

or not he will concede that the mystery alone is self-evident; whether he thinks that the little light with which he illuminates this little island—we call it science—should be the eternal light which shines on him forever (which would be hell). (57)

In the third part of the essay, Rahner's pace becomes dizzying. The question is, how are the two strands which have been discussed (the mysteries in the plural, and the one Holy Mystery) related to one another? Rahner gives us a rapid survey of those things are or might be spoken of as mysteries in Catholic theology of the time: the Trinity, the hypostatic union, grace, the beatific vision, the Eucharistic transubstantiation and real presence of Christ, more generally sacraments and 'all positive institutions and decrees of God with regard to Church offices', original sin, redemption. Some of these, he argues, should be seen as rooted in others: for instance, transubstantiation is grounded in the hypostatic union, original sin is 'comparatively easy to reduce to...the supernatural sanctification of man by grace prior to his personal decision'; an understanding of redemption follows, with the addition of some non-mysterious presuppositions, from acceptance of the mystery of the Incarnation. Other candidates for the title of mystery turn out not to count as mysteries at all (the positive institutions and decrees). In the end, everything which might be spoken of as mystery turns out to be rooted in three *mysteria stricte dicta*: Trinity, Incarnation and 'the divinization of man in grace and glory'.

Having brought the contenders for mysteries of the faith down to these three, Rahner next gives us several very intense pages of theology around grace and glory, Incarnation, and Trinity—pages which are entirely consistent with what he develops in other places, it should be said, but too dense to be summarized here—all of which lead to the conclusion that these mysteries are ultimately no different from the one Holy Mystery discussed in the second part: the three mysteries 'signify the articulation of the one single mystery of God, being the radical form of his one comprehensive mysteriousness, since it has been revealed in Jesus Christ that this absolute and abiding mystery can exist not only in the guise of distant aloofness, but also as absolute proximity to us, through the divine self-communication'. (72) Or, in a slightly simpler formulation, the three *mysteria stricte dicta* have been shown to be 'really intrinsically connected, in their character of communication of the absolute proximity of the primordial mystery'(72).

The project of this essay may seem somewhat parochial, insofar as it is set over against a way of thinking about 'the mysteries' of the faith which predominated in the Catholicism of a particular period. But it can also be seen through a broader lens: Rahner is wrestling with the relationship between the complexity of a dogmatic system, the complexity of theology itself, and the sense that there must be an ultimate coherence, simplicity and unity of faith: 'Is Christian doctrine', he asks at the beginning, 'really a highly complicated system of orderly statements? Or is it rather a mysteriously simple thing of infinite fullness?' He is undertaking, especially in the third part of the essay, the intellectual work of bringing out the interconnectedness of doctrine, so that it can all be understood to point to the 'mysteriously simple thing'.

An obvious question, of course, is whether Rahner has brought the complexity down in the end to something too simple. Is such a search for coherence and unity ultimately reductive? Does everything that is distinctive about Christian belief really come down to nothing but an affirmation, or an experience, of 'the absolute proximity of the primordial mystery'? Should we say that Rahner would have done better to escape the over-complex

propositionalism of neo-scholasticism in a different way, by moving to a focus on the centrality of narrative, or of drama? Perhaps Balthasar had the right of it here, insofar as this would be a way of countering the alienation of an overly complicated propositionalism which allows the distinctiveness of Christianity—its texture, and particular contours—to remain.

In fact, I think, on this kind of question at least, the either/or between Rahner and Balthasar needs to be avoided. There is no reason why we have to choose between narrative or dramatic theological approaches (or more generally, theological styles which keep theology closer to the text and texture of Scripture) and the more speculative or even mystical attempts to see all things in connection with a centre, to distill the whole of the Christian life and message to an absolute core. Were a Rahner-scholasticism to set in, as was perhaps a danger in the 1970s in certain parts of the Catholic world, this could certainly be an impoverishment to the Church. Rahner's *reductio ad mysterium* cannot be the only approach. But were his kind of theological instinct, the instinct to distil, to get to the heart of things, to articulate the absolute centre of belief, to name what is essential and distinctive to belief in the simplest possible terms—were such a theological instinct to be proscribed, that too would entail an impoverishment of both life and thought in the Church. We need both thinkers who will call to mind the immensely textured richness and complexity of Scripture, tradition and Christian practice—its peculiarity, its particularity, its utter distinctiveness from other thought- and life-patterns—and thinkers who urge us towards a grasp of an utterly coherent simplicity of Christian belief.

How different is belief from unbelief? If we need both styles of theology, then perhaps we need to find a way to combine two quite different answers to this question. On one level the difference is enormous and manifold: the believer's vision of the world and way of life is shaped by liturgy, text, story, and they understand themselves to be immersed in a drama – a play within the play of the Trinity, on Balthasar's account, for instance—which is different to anything imagined by the unbeliever. On another level however the difference is subtle and elusive. The believer doesn't in the end think that they know anything more than the unbeliever. Their faith isn't really about supposing they have access to extra bits of information: it is ultimately a disposition towards, an orientation towards, the mystery in which they live and by which they find themselves encountered.

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