

# Karl Rahner's Thought and His Contribution to the Christian Theology and Philosophy in 20th Century

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**Abstract:** With the passage of time, the interaction of intellectuals of different faiths led to the study of one another's religion. This resulted in bringing them closer and developing respect for one another. The modern times saw the emergence and strengthening of inter-faith dialogue which helped maintain peace and harmony in multi-religious societies. Theologians from all religions contributed a lot to these activities. The twentieth century produced one theologian whose philosophy and understanding of different Religions led him to become a focal point for contemporary scholars. This was Karl Rahner whose study and explanation of theological and philosophical beliefs raised him so high that the whole Church was influenced by his theology and philosophy. The objectives of the study are to explore different approaches of Karl Rahner in theology and philosophy in post-modern era. The study is descriptive in nature. And the critical and analytical methods have been done to meet the objectives of the study. The study is significant for the philosophers, religious scholars, researchers and theologians.

**Key Words:** Karl Rahner, Christian, Theology. Philosophy and Vatican II

## Introduction:

He was a German Catholic theologian born in 1904 and lived for eighty years. From a vantage point in theology, he viewed Islam, Judaism and Christianity as closely related religions on the basis of their monotheistic belief in God. In Christianity, however, this belief is shaped through the dogma of the Trinity of God. Rahner has been the influential Jesuit Priest who was involved in a kind of revolution of the Catholic Church. There could have been no idea of liberalization of dogma at the Second Vatican Council without Rahner's contribution. This led to attacks on him by reactionary Catholics. He continued with fruitful efforts and was ultimately acknowledged as a bridge builder in the Roman Catholic Church. Now he is recognized as the theologian of the modern era. What separates Rahner from all other intellectuals of the Church is his radically innovative approach to theology with its philosophical roots. In addition to this, he had a concern with questions of mysticism. For Rahner, to be human is to be in relationship with God. The center is God who enters into relationship with humans through God's own self-communication. Rahner's mystical project explains that to be human is to be inseparable from God. However his endeavor was to make it understandable for the people who are seen to possess, at some level, a true knowledge of God. He stated: "It must be made intelligible to people, that they have an implicit but true knowledge of God perhaps not reflected upon and not verbalized; or better expressed, they have a genuine experience of God ultimately rooted in their spiritual existence, whatever you want to call it". It is evident that Rahner's emphasis is on the human mystical experience. The human being tends to have a relation with God since a human person is capable for encountering the Holy Mystery. This mystical encounter is possible in all situations of everyday life. Regarding this Rahner comments, "We weave fabric of our eternal lives out of the humdrum days." At this stage, the mystical experience is there even in the banal activities of personal habits. Eating, sleeping and even thinking are in a way mystic activity. On the basis of this philosophy, Rahner affirmed that salvation was possible even outside the Church. To him, all humans are salvifically touched by the grace of Christ. Therefore, he coined the phrase "Anonymous Christians" to elaborate his conviction. There has been a lot of influence on the thinking of Karl Rahner yet he himself pointed out how important was Martin Heidegger for him. Rahner remarked, "Although I had many good professors in the classroom, there is only one whom I can revere as my teacher, and he is Martin Heidegger". The one

(Rahner) with his name on 4000 titles of literary works is really astonishing. He was a man driven by the spirit of god which dominated most of his literary services. His influence is commented by Leo O'Donovan as: "In a remarkable way his thought combined depth and sensitivity, witness to the Christian tradition and awareness of faith's new situation, a powerful appreciation of human suffering and an unvanquished hope for its redemption, he became at once a theologian among theologians and a pastor among pastors." Because of this, he won the position of an expert in Vatican II. Here he contributed to bringing about many reforms. Because of his vision, there is found an increasing fear in the Church regarding a growing tendency towards a pre-conciliar mind. The following pages will discuss in detail how the great theologian developed almost changing the very foundations of the Catholic Church and its approach to theology of dialogue in the modern era.

**Karl Rahner: A Theologian and Philosopher** Karl Rahner had an unremarkable upbringing. His family was Catholic with middle class life standards. He had been an average student at school. After his graduation, he entered the Jesuit community. The years of Jesuit formation and the study of philosophy and theology knitted Rahner's mind to develop his thought in critical dialogue. The great philosopher worked on "spirit in the world" as his doctoral thesis in philosophy, but it is strange to know that this work was rejected. Rahner did not lose heart and went to Innsbruck. He studied under the famous intellectuals; like Martin Heidegger who motivated him to develop his modern thinking in theology. In 1937, he started lecturing at the theological faculty of Innsbruck. It was tragically closed by the Nazis in 1937. Rahner kept himself busy with pastoral work during the years of World War II. A critic of Rahner, Bernard Haering remarked that Karl Rahner was a thoroughly pastoral minded thinker fully dedicated to the Churches mission of salvation. Rahner rejoined Innsbruck in 1948 at the reopening of the faculty. He also taught at Munich and Munster. Apparently this was not an exceptional academic and religious life. But the contribution he made to develop new approach towards theology was remarkable. He brought new interest to the ignored theological landscape which was considered by many theologians as lifeless. This was an intellectual as well as spiritual reinvigoration. Rahner was a modern professor and must have been very impressive at university level. But he gained his popularity as a theologian who like many others was above all pastor. Regarding Thomas Aquinas, Rahner considered the French Jesuit Pierre Rousselot (1878-1915) and the Belgian Jesuit Joseph Marechal (1878-1944) as an influential figure in the interpretation of Thomas. These theologians proposed a "new-theology" in order to retrieve the real Thomas. In their view, the neo-scholastic interpreters had deformed him. He was a scholar of the first rank having a full command of the methods of his discipline and aided by his interest in all fields of theology. His career as a theologian gained him high rate success. He served as a member of the faculty of theology at Innsbruck University nominally from 1937 and effectively from 1948 to 1964. His teaching and writings came to be extremely influential. Besides, he also rendered his services as editor, lecturer, retreat master and preacher. These successful services attracted the attention of the Church leadership towards him. Thus, Rahner was appointed as an official theological consultant in 1962 which in 1969 led to him being appointed to the Papal theological commission. These two appointments resulted in his retirement from teaching in 1971. He was recognized as a theologian of international repute. During the last years of his life, he enjoyed many academic honors. He remained an active servant to the church till his death. Karl Rahner's theological achievements have been extremely influential all over the world. He has been the most important theologian of the Catholic Church since the 1960s. In the ongoing Church culture, he encouraged a move towards modernity. He strongly rejected past conventions of doctrine and liberated the present for a perspective towards an effective future. This rejection is moved to the churches and schools, social activists and mystics, and theology. A follower and critic of Rahner, Johan Baptist Metz wrote: "Karl Rahner renewed the face of our theology. Nothing is now as it was before him. Even those who criticize him are fueled by his insights, insightful and moving perceptions about the world of life and faith". It is very impressive that he led others how to think about God, Christ, human beings and the Church. For this, Rahner is considered by the theologians of the post-modern era as one of the outstanding and venturesome theologians. Many books are being produced on the life, works and theological services of Rahner. The theologians of his age recognized Rahnas a theologian who led them towards an

understanding of how to be Catholic and modern at the same time. He helped Christians see their faith and the Church in a deeper and broader way. He stated,

“Theology has always been devoted to giving access to the realities of faith”. Rahner was such a great academician and intellectual that he never sought importance or fame. He had strong interaction with all kinds of people in society and Church. That is why his theology entered into people’s lives in a particular way. To him, theology was a historical discovery and cultural insight. Rahner was modest and approachable having no interest in prestige or in power. He described his life as without anything distinctive about it, but just in the service of God. A German theologian has recently written: “Rahner was a figure of destiny for theology in the twentieth century in Germany and beyond. He took up a new the modern world which many wished to ignore. Divine providence gave him various gifts for accomplishing great things. He was the most gifted speculative mind of the past century, and yet he was ambitious to the point of forgetting about himself even as he pursued an inexhaustible production of writings and lectures. He launched a land side in theology because he was at the right place at the right time”. Rahner was an indefatigable searcher for truth, for deeper insight and for better communication with people of the modern age. His habit of doubting led him to further insight and to renounce false certainties and securities. He was one of the greatest ecumenical theologians in many ways. His works are effectively studied by other Christians beyond the Roman Catholic Church. He was almost a Church Father and never disowned his Roman Catholic identity. He has given evidence how one can be fully loyal to the Catholic tradition with a truly all-embracing openness. This was the spiritual attitude of Rahner supported by his vast knowledge of all Christian traditions, and his own transcendental thought pattern. His own ecumenical and inter-cultural concerns developed markedly in the last decades of his life. He has been categorized as a neo-orthodox Catholic and a revisionist neo-scholastic. Not only that, he is also believed to have been an existentialist, a conservative theologian, an excessive critic of Church authority and its teaching, and most commonly of all a transcendental theologian. Much influence on Rahner’s approach to theology was exerted by his spiritual and intellectual formation in the society of the Jesuits. He always practiced theology for the Church’s life, its spiritual uplift and its pastoral services. By this, he probed into every element of Christian belief and practice whereby he elaborated the nature and method of theology, the doctrine of God and the anthropological aspects of theology. Rahner’s theology is firmly based on the holistic reflection on the reality of God and human reality with a multifaceted framework. From this basis he was driven to intellectual thinking about all kinds of issues. Theorizing is possible within the boundaries of the whole creation between the finite and the infinite. Rahner’s reflection led him towards engaging with a philosophy which addressed the question of what it means to be human for God. That is why he posed such questions as: “What does it mean to be human and to dwell in encounters with Divine mystery? What do we mean in using the word “God”? How are we to think about a world in which God and humans meet one another? Much that is common to people of all faiths and cultures can be discovered through careful reflection on the metaphysics of God, world and human being and knowing- because we are human, and because being human is to open into the mystery of God”. All his services embody a coherent theological program. Rahner sought to articulate a vision of concrete Christian and human existence in the world as embraced by god-the holy mystery. Rahner endeavored to search for the best elements of Catholic theology. He avoided obscurities and his theological proposals provoked controversy on various fronts. Rahner’s emphasis is on the universalism of a theology of grace and revelation. He was the prominent Catholic dogmatic theologian who endeavored to display the continuities between the natural and the supernatural orders of being. He sought to correct a standard neo-scholastic theology by giving an account of the conditions for the possibility in human knowledge of a recognition and reception of divine revelation. His theological program restored the Christian faith. His writings embody a strong affirmation of the central elements of the Christian tradition. He focused his attention on the emerging Church dialogue with large religious and non-religious movements. Rahner stressed the importance of the interior life for modern men and women drawing many to prayers and meditation. It was the time when a shift in theology occurred between Vatican I and Vatican II that Rahner developed his own method of theology. He was influenced by and had his influence on the advancements in theology

that paved the way to the Vatican II mainly through incorporating philosophy in the theological developments. Rahner was a leading figure in all these developments. This led the Council to become progressive in the interest of a modernity (mingled with) which allowed space for liberalism as well as feminist, post-colonial and pluralist theologies. Rahner's method was favored in the Vatican II considering its anthropological aspect and its endeavor to bring Thomist philosophy and theology into dialogue. Modernity entered the Church through Rahner not least because of his theology of freedom and free speech. However, many critics have attacked the theological method of Rahner since, as they claimed, it included a lot of error regarding the post-modern and post-liberal scenario. These criticisms are diverse. One (argues) objects that Rahner has a philosophical and theological anthropological basis. Another suspects it of a false universalism whereas a third questions its insufficient political basis. The question arises whether such criticism does adequate justice to Rahner's theology or whether it represents a caricature, distortion, misunderstanding or partial understanding of his theology. The following sections are designed to elaborate Rahner's method of theology briefly.

**Foundation list Method:**The Theology of Karl Rahner has deep roots in philosophy in such a way that rationalism and transcendentalism go side by side like Kantian philosophy. According to Fergus Kerr, Rahner's theological qualities are embedded in a strongly mentalist epistemology. This mentalist individualist conception of the self seems difficult to reconcile with the tradition of the Church. Another critic of Rahner, Kevin Hart remarks that the understanding of the human self is not influenced by the experience of God. To him, the attention to the transcendence of the self is minimized through emphasis on self-transcendence. George Lindbeck regards this transcendental theology as an expressive experience with religious universalism neglecting cultural and linguistic particularities. From another perspective, Rahner's method is criticized for its consequences for the interpretation of Christianity. It represents an interpretation of God's love as a universal salvation, and understands this to be a mark uniqueness of Christianity. Rahner's method, it is argued, neglects the historical singularity of Christ. It does not relate Christianity without conceiving other religions as avenues of salvation. Bruce Marshall also criticized Rahner's Christology as Christ becomes primarily an example rather than being seen as a historically unique and singular individual. The crux of the matter is that the transcendental theology questions the singularity of the Christian revelation. Johann Baptist Metz, a student and life-long friend of Rahner also criticized Rahner's approach to theology. Metz's political theology seeks to correct the privatization of religion. He finds Rahner's method politically insufficient. He questions whether salvation is reduced to a private and individual affair thereby failing to explore the social and political dimensions of salvation. This aspect is not sufficiently taken into account in Rahner's theology.

**Transcendental Theological Basis:**Rahner's transcendental basis is developed throughout his two major philosophical works: *Spirit in the World* and *Hearer of the Word*. Transcendentalism as described by Rahner is the dilemma of knowing of the human being that is capable to advance towards the unlimited horizon and to encounter the mystery of God. This approach became the basis for Rahner's theology of "Anonymous Christians" "in which having salvation is understood as revealed by Jesus Christ who explained Grace and Nature clearly. There is a concrete order of reality. Creation itself is 'grace' in an indirect sense. Grace covers the human existence always and everywhere. God has an universal salvific will as explained by Christ. He offers his self-communication to free human beings. There does not exist any "pure nature" in a pure state. This, to Rahner, had been the flaw of neo-scholasticism and a concept with which he was never satisfied. He objected to it as it confused abstraction with what concretely existed. Concrete human nature is the union of pure nature and grace. Human existence never separates the two. Grace is a dynamic orientation in the human existence. From here radiates a transcendental experience of human beings since they are qualified by grace and consciousness. However, it is not necessary that grace is adequately expressed. The human being is oriented towards God because of the foundational relation between Grace and Nature. Rahner addresses this relation between man and God as transcendental. He states, "Man is the being who possesses unlimited transcendence of knowledge and freedom. The inner dynamism of his spirit is directed to absolute being, to absolute hope, to absolute

future, to good in itself, to what is unconditionally right, and thus to God.” God is an implicit mystery but detectable through a transcendental experience which is the condition of the possibility for an intelligibility of all explicit religious assertions. Building on this experience, Rahner coined the term “Anonymous Christians” based upon his understanding of the salvific will of God and his confession of Christ as the absolute self-communication of God to humanity.

### Discussion and Conclusion

The above discussion is concluded that “Rahner was the influential Christian theologian in the post-modern era. He lived for eight years and served as theologian for about six decades. It was during his Jesuit formation that he stated reflecting about theology and its role in the personal life of human being. During the study years the Ignatius spiritual exercises developed such a Rahner whose prime concern in theology was man’s relation with God. To him, being human meant to be in relation with God Who enters humans through self-communication, Though he proved to be revivalist of the Roman Catholic Church yet he received very bitter criticism. It was very hard for him to make the intellectuals realize his understanding of theology. He continued to add to the Church’s dignity and eventually won his critics who not only admired Rahner’s theological achievements but also accepted him as the post modern philosopher. 4000 literary works with Rahner’s name on the title page undeniably prove him the philosopher.

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