

A Response to the Rev. William V. Dych's Presentation entitled
"Method in Theology According to Karl Rahner"

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In the eleventh volume of his Theological Investigations Fr. Rahner published a 68-page paper setting forth his Reflections on Methodology in Theology. He began by expressing his embarrassment when asked to treat this topic for, while over the years he had touched upon methodological aspects of particular questions, he had never attempted to tackle the issue in its full range.¹ I think one has to accept some such a view of Rahner's work. Dr. Anne Carr of the University of Chicago Divinity School did a doctoral dissertation on Fr. Rahner's views on method and found it necessary to reach them by inference from his writings on more particular topics. And Fr. Dych, to whose address I am to offer an appendage, reviewed Dr. Carr's work favorably in Theological Studies. But if Fr. Rahner has not tackled the problem of method in a general fashion, he has given us an extremely penetrating account of the difficulties of that task at the present time. The work of a contemporary theologian, he has said, has to find a niche in the midst of an uncontrollable pluralism of theologies. This pluralism emerges out of an ongoing and incalculable development of human thought. His task can hardly be the contribution of a collaborator working on a common site on which a single building is being erected according to a settled plan that is known to all. On the contrary, he finds himself an alien, alone, isolated. He may work on the basis of a world of ideas, from certain premises, with certain philosophical preconceptions as his tools. But he can hardly fail to be aware that all such suppositions are subject to historical conditions and to the limitations

of particular epochs. Yet such awareness does not make him capable of eliminating these limitations. For the first time in the history of theological thought theology not only is conditioned by history but also is aware of being unable to overcome this conditioning.²

Such sentiments are not peculiar to Fr. Rahner. Well before Vatican II, while I was teaching at the Gregorian, Fr. Eduard Dhanis, who held a succession of high offices at the Gregorian and in the Roman Congregations, expressed to me his firm conviction that, while Catholic theologians agreed on the dogmas of the Church, they agreed on little else. Finally, while Vatican II brought many blessings, it remains that Fr. Rahner's paper on methodology in theology was begun in 1969 and that Fr. Dhanis' contention that theologians were unanimous in their acceptance of the dogmas of faith only with difficulty can any longer be maintained.

It remains that Fr. Rahner himself has very clear ideas on a particular method. He names it indirect method. He has given us a large sample of it in his Foundations of Christian Faith. It is a method that can be backed by appeals to the rules for the discernment of spirits for the second week of St. Ignatius' Spiritual Exercises, to Newman's Grammar of Assent, to Polanyi's tacit knowledge, to articles by Eric Voegelin, and to my own account of Natural Right and Historical Mindedness.³

Nor is his contribution limited to such an indirect method. For if one understands by method, not something like The New Method Laundry or a book of recipes for a cook, but rather a framework for collaboration in creativity and, more particularly, a normative pattern of related and repeated operations with ongoing and cumulative results, then I believe one will find ways to control the present uncontrollable pluralism of

theologies, one will cease to work alien, alone, isolated, one will become aware of a common site with an edifice to be erected, not in accord with a static blueprint, but under the leadership of an emergent probability that yields results proportionate to human diligence and intelligence. In brief, I should say that Fr. Rahner has laid down the conditions and expounded the need for a radical development in theological method. Such insight into the needs of contemporary theology are, to my mind, a remarkable confirmation of the widely held view that Fr. Rahner has been among the foremost doctrinal theologians of his age.

x (contexts)
 It remains that my own concern, has been less with developing doctrines than with discovering how one develops them with method. A first point, of course, is that "method" means different things in different historical contexts. Perhaps the most celebrated was Descartes' proposal that we begin from indubitable truth and proceed by deduction even to the point of deducing the conservation of momentum from the immutability of God. In contrast, Hans-Georg Gadamer's great work on Wahrheit und Methode, Truth and Method, has been understood to take "method" in a Cartesian sense and to contend that the search for truth was what counted while "method" was an obstacle.

My own thought on method began in England where I studied philosophy. H. B. W. Joseph's Introduction to Logic not only grounded one thoroughly in the Aristotelian syllogism but also offered an instructive introduction to scientific procedures, an account that was broadened by some knowledge of the calculus and of the logical inadequacy of Euclid's argumentation. Then Newman's Grammar of Assent charmed me with its convincing account that common sense does not develop in accord with the rules of

syllogism. From Newman I went to Plato and from Plato to Augustine's early dialogues at Cassiacum. I studied theology in Rome where among my companions was an Athenian who had studied philosophy at Louvain, was at home with Maréchal and taught me what was meant by the statement that human knowledge was discursive, not a matter of taking a look with the eyes of the mind, but of asking questions and coming to know when one chanced upon satisfactory answers. Doctoral work on Aquinas' development of the concept of actual grace and on the dependence of concepts on understanding helped me towards a rounded view.

So by 1949 I began to work out my notion of method as a Generalized Empirical Method. A first stage was the book, Insight, which found common features in mathematics, physics, common sense, and philosophy and, later with help from Hans-Georg Gadamer, in interpretation and history.

I recount these strange faits divers because they throw some light on my perhaps stranger opinions. I list them with some attempt at order.

First, metaphysics is first in itself but it is not first for us. What is first for us on a reflective level is our own conscious and intentional activities. Such reflection must not presuppose metaphysics, else the metaphysics will not be critical, and so it does not speak of potencies and habits, however implicit, but only of conscious and intentional events and their experienced interrelations.

Second, as Vernon Gregson has remarked, such reflection is like a therapy. Just as Carl Rogers' client-centered therapy aims at having the client discover in himself the feelings he cannot name or identify so reflection on one's interior operations is a matter of coming to name, recognize, identify operations that recur continuously but commonly are

thought to be very mysterious. Insights are a dime a dozen, most of them are inadequate when taken singly, but far too many people are certain either that they do not exist or at least are excessively obscure.

Third, the omission of talk about potencies and habits and concentration on events and their experienced relations, pulls thought out of the realm of faculty psychology into that of intentionality analysis. That yields a psychology of data, questions, and answers, with the questions on the three levels of questions for intelligence, questions for sufficient reason for factual judgments, and questions for evaluation and decision.

Fourth, this makes the precedence of intellect on will like the precedence of sense on intellect. It makes it just what normally happens. It does not exclude divine operation directly on the fourth level. As St. Paul instructed the Romans: God's love has flooded our inmost hearts by the Holy Spirit he has given us. Such flooding hardly can be due to some intellectual apprehension in this life, especially since the mystics are given to celebrating their cloud of unknowing.

Fifthly, at this point Generalized Empirical Method becomes theological. The transition may be illustrated by the words of our Lord to St. Peter. Blessed are thou Simon Bar Jonah for flesh and blood has not revealed this to thee but my Father who is in heaven. Words, that Eric Voegelin contrasts with the words to the other disciples, Tell no man that I am the Christ. The two, Voegelin contrasts as revelation, the Father to Peter, and information, the words of the disciples to every Tom Dick and Harry. A similar doctrine is to be had from John 6: 44f, and John 12, 32. Besides the inner gift of the spirit, there is the sensible spectacle of Christ on the cross. With those steps we are already into Christian theology.

Notes

¹Rahner, Karl "Reflections on Methodology in Theology," Theological Investigations XI/1, E. T. by David Bourke, London: Darton, Longman & Todd; New York: Seabury Press, 1974. Pp. 68 f.

²Ibid., p. 74.

³Ibid., pp. 76-84. See also:

Rahner, Karl, Foundations of Christian Faith, E. T. by William Dych, New York: Seabury Press, 1978, Preface pp. 8 f.; pp. 346 f.

Voegelin, E. "Reason: The Classic Experience," The Southern Review, 10 (1974). Pp. 237-264. "The Gospel and Culture," Jesus and Man's Hope, edited by D. G. Miller and D. Y. Hadidian, Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh Theological Seminary (1971). Pp. 59-101.

Lonergan, B. "Natural Right and Historical Mindedness," Proceedings: American Catholic Philosophical Ass'n, Washington, D.C. 20064: The National Secretary of the Ass'n, The Catholic University of America, 51 (1977). Pp. 132-143.