

Karl Rahner's "Method in Theology"

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

None the less, he does give a succinct and penetrating sketch of the difficulties inherent in such a task. The work of a contemporary theologian 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's contention that theologians were unanimous in their acceptance of the dogmas of faith can no 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 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 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.

A first point, of course, is that problems of method are not peculiar to contemporary theology but to the whole of modern thought. I have been engaged directly or indirectly with such issues for over fifty years. My doctoral dissertation was on St. Thomas' thought on operative grace, the grace by which we become willing to do the good that previously we were unwilling to do, the grace of conversion. The notion has stuck with me and my Method in Theology insists on three conversions, religious, moral, and intellectual, and such conversions make a serious contribution, if they occur, to the uncontrollable pluralism of contemporary theologies. A second study followed on St. Thomas' account of intelligentia dicens and verbum dictum.⁴ It was followed by a book, Insight, which endeavored to work out a generalized empirical method. It began from the chief tool of natural science, viz., mathematics, it went on to physics, common sense, various kinds of judgment, to turn to being, not as the Scotist or Hegelian minimum of connotation and maximum of denotation, not as Hartshorne's immutable entity that forced finite realities into the category of becoming, but as the comprehensive objective intended by man's unending wonder and inquiry. There followed an account of objectivity, not as a kitten's already-out-there-now-real, but as the fruit of authentic subjectivity. On this was constructed a critical metaphysics in which every term was validated by a corresponding cognitional act. In Method in Theology, the technique of interpretation and critical history was supplemented by a study of "History and Historians" and rounded off by a method of dialectic to bring to heel divergent value judgments.

Our placing of critical metaphysics after an advertence to cognitional activities involves an elimination of what Francis Bacon dignified with the name, the idols of the theatre or, if you prefer, the idols of the den. Traditional Aristotelians consider it a condition of the possibility of human discourse to begin with metaphysics. Being is the most general of concepts. Therefore all discourse must presuppose metaphysics. Now I have no doubt that metaphysics has a priority in the order of things quoad se. But it does not follow that metaphysics is first quoad nos. Nor is it Aristotelian doctrine that discourse begins from what is first quoad se. First one observes the phases of the moon; then one may conclude that the moon's shape must be spherical. Once that conclusion is reached, of course, one may begin from the moon's sphericity to deduce the phases and even other properties. It is a two-way street, just as in theology one ascends from Christ as man to Christ as God and also one then descends from Christ as God to Christ as man.

It follows that one begins from the data of consciousness without any introduction of the metaphysical notions of potencies or faculties, of habits or first acts, of events as second acts. But one must try to uncover the events and even the relations between the events. For while all sensitive, intellectual, and volitional acts are conscious, it does not follow that we already know their names, know which names apply to which events, or how to use the names to isolate the events, to become familiar with them, to gradually come to control them. The matter is evident from Carl Rogers client-centered therapy which enables the client to discern the unnamed feelings that trouble him, come to name them, move from fearing them to familiarity with them, etc.

So it was by an illuminating metaphor that Vernon Gregson, in a doctoral dissertation submitted to this university and approved by it, referred to my efforts in Insight and Method in Theology as a therapy. May I add that those that need the therapy but are unaware of the fact have to content with Newman's notional apprehensions and notional assents, while those with the humility and courage to work through the therapy have entered Newman's happy hunting ground of real apprehensions and real assents about their own reality.

A further point is that the concentration on the data of consciousness and the consequent omission of talk about potencies or faculties pulls our thought out of a faculty psychology and into an intentionality analysis. So it is that talk about the will vanishes and in its place comes a structure of questions and answers. Just as there are questions for intelligence that lead to insights and formulations, just as there are questions for reflection that lead to marshalling and weighing evidence and then to positive or negative, probable or certain judgments, so too there are questions for responsibility that ask what is truly worth while, really good, and so advance beyond the pale of individual or group egoism into the moral sphere.

From this follows a great benefit to theology. Faculty psychology has no doubt that the will, unless it is arbitrary and so irrational, must follow upon a previous act of intellect. Of this fact I have no doubt as long as consciousness is moving ^{up} from experience through understanding and judgment up to the level of deliberating and choosing. But I am more than inclined to affirm that this upward movement is not the sole movement in human development. St. Paul instructed the Romans (5, 5)

that "God's love has flooded our inmost hearts through the Holy Spirit he has given us." It is indeed difficult to conceive in man an intellectual act proportionate to such love. In any case the effort to discover such an act of intellect seems superfluous when the mystics have so much praise for their cloud of unknowing.

So we effect the transition from a generalized empirical method that falls short of theology to the generalization that makes room for theology. Obviously the theology that it makes room for, also is a praxis, a theology that on its basic issues calls for existential decisions rather than the old-time boast, invicta demonstratur.⁵ Moreover it is theology that stands outside the transient, for the transient is what basically is meant by words, which so easily are mistaken and more often are misunderstood, while intentionality analysis uses words only to draw attention, if necessary by a therapy, to inner events that are not only intentional but also conscious, that can change only with a radical change in the intentional consciousness of homo sapiens, that admit the simple structuring of primitives, the practical structuring of the ancient high civilizations, the logical structuring that underpin classical culture, Greek philosophy, and medieval Scholasticism, and the methodical approach characteristic more and more of the developing and/or declining culture that takes its stand not on first principles but on the methods that, as they generate the principles, so too can come to correct them.

You may object that this is relativism. But it is relativism only to a classicist mentality, and classicist mentality has had its long and once useful day.⁶ Ours is a new epoch. Fr. Rahner has listed present deficiencies, Fr. Claude Geffré has described a new age of theology. In that age I feel we have to live and work.

- 1) Rahner, Karl "Reflections on Methodology in Theology,"
1974 Theological Investigations XI/1, E. T. by David Bourke, London: Darton, Longman & Todd; New York: Seabury Press, 1974. pp. 68 f.
- 2) Ibid., p. 74.
- 3) Ibid., pp. 76-84. See also:
Rahner, Karl Foundations of Christian Faith, E. T. by
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- 1971 "The Gospel and Culture," Jesus and man's hope,
edited by D. G. Miller and D. Y. Hadidian,
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pp. 59-101.
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1977 Proceedings: American Catholic Philosophical
Ass'n, Washington, D. C. 20064: The National
Secretary of the Ass'n, The Catholic University
of America, 51: 132-143.
- 4) I. e., "intelligent utterance," and "uttered intelligibility,"
or "pensée pensante" and "pensée pensée" (Blondel), or perhaps
"noësis" and "noëma," (Husserl).
- 5) Lonergan, B. "Theology and praxis," Proceedings of Catholic
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07430: Darlington Seminary, pp. 1-16.
- 6) Lonergan, B. Collection. Papers by B. Lonergan edited by
1967 F. E. Crowe, New York: Herder and Herder (now
Seabury Press) and London: Darton, Longman &

Todd, pp. 252-267. See also "Natural Right and Historical Mindedness," referred to in note 3, above.