

KARL RAHNER'S *THE SHAPE OF THE CHURCH TO COME*: A REVIEW ARTICLE¹

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By common consent Karl Rahner is regarded as the leading Roman Catholic theologian of our time. Few theological topics have failed to engage his attention at one point or other in his long productive academic career. His enviable reputation may very well stem from his unusual capacity to treat a large assortment of contemporary issues in a manner that is both historically and systematically sophisticated. His *Shape of the Church to Come* is no exception.

The theme of this little book is clear from its title. In a way, it continues a debate which started at the 1971 meeting of the German Synod of Bishops. Since the resolutions adopted by the synod would have a lasting influence on the future of the German Catholic Church, should not the synod, asks Rahner, have raised the very question that is fundamental to effective discussion and decision—i.e. the basic concept of the Synod itself—before turning to the mass of particular issues and problems assigned to it? How, without some kind of consensus on a total concept of the synod, could the episcopal assembly establish its aims, concentrate its activities, and provide a strategy for building up the church of the future (pp. 10-16)?

Such a concept, Rahner believes, is imperative. It cannot be derived simply from unquestionable statements of faith, or from the decrees of Vatican II. Both are too general to be turned at once into individual norms. Besides, they are often expressed in the light of presuppositions which cannot be regarded simply

¹ A review of Karl Rahner, *The Shape of the Church to Come*, trans. and introd. by Edward Quinn (New York: The Seabury Press, 1974), 136 pp. (price: \$6.95).

as those of today and tomorrow. The concept has to be worked out in the light of all these, but also in the light of a really adequate understanding of the constantly changing intellectual and social situation of today.

Rahner has no intention of providing this basic concept. It would be too much to expect of any single individual or even of a single group. The purpose of his book is essentially to put forward some preliminary considerations in regard to such a concept.

Three questions form the background of Rahner's reflection: Where do we stand? What are we to do? How can the church of the future be envisioned? Each chapter,² in the best Rahnerian tradition, indicates new methods of approaching the solution to old problems. It suggests surprising insights into the significance of accepted positions, but rarely takes the time to do more than sketch the general outlines of a particular theological argument or to indicate the overall viability of some new reading of Catholic theological tradition.

As usual, the author goes straight to the really difficult point in order to demonstrate the anomaly it contains, and returns to it each time he searches for a solution of a specific issue. On this occasion, the central issue-principle is a correct understanding of the mission of the church in today's and tomorrow's world. Rahner does not, of course, dispute that there exists an essential institutional relationship between the church of today and that of past generations, but he holds that a clear determination of the church's role in the modern world requires both a deep sense of history and a prophetic awareness of the gospel message (p. 46). The future of the church cannot be planned and built up merely by the application of generally recognized principles inherited from the past. It needs the courage of an "ultimately charismatically inspired, creative imagination" (p. 47).

² The book contains 18 relatively short chapters, from 3 to 11 pages long.

The present situation, in Rahner's view, is one of "transition"³ from a church sustained by a homogeneously Christian society—and almost identical with it—to a church made up "of those who have struggled against their environment in order to reach a personally clearly and explicitly responsible decision of faith" (p. 24). Christianity and the church today, and still more tomorrow, affirms Rahner, will be living in a situation in which the general public consciousness, marked by the empirical sciences and their methods, although not really excluding faith and all reference to God, will be in a quite definite sense a-theistic. Critically dissociating themselves, in virtue of "a personal decision in every case" (p. 23), from the prevalent opinions and feelings of their social environment, Christians must expect to be "a little flock" (pp. 29-34), composed of those few who commit themselves with a living faith in Christ to the work of redeeming the world and rely solely on His grace to achieve this.⁴

Returning in each instance to this basic principle—the concept of the mission of the church in the world—the Jesuit theologian suggests solutions to several of the major issues confronting the Catholic Church. To be sure, there is more to Rahner's method than a mere analysis of the present intellectual and theological situation, but the various applications of this principle to the theological problems well illustrate the general method adopted by the author. Some of the solutions he suggests are quite startling. The authority of the church, the *magisterium*, remains (pp. 93-96, 52-55, 119-121); but it must be much more careful to show that its teaching is rooted in the gospel and not expect people simply to accept it just because it is given out by authority (pp. 95-96). The precise force of teaching must be clearly stated and the church must be ready to give up positions which are no part of her essential claims (pp. 48-49). She must also be ready

³ On this "transitional state," see pp. 22, 25-26, 27.

⁴ Rahner draws a clear distinction between the "little flock" and a sect, the latter being defined not by numbers but by mentality. See esp. pp. 29-30, 93-95, 116-117.

to put forward instructions without the necessity of asserting them to be directly inspired by the Holy Spirit (pp. 97-98, 46-47).

The priest retains his important place (p. 58), but he must be prepared to work more and more in a declericalized church, i.e. a church in which the office-holders in joyous humility allow for the fact that the Spirit breathes where he will and that he has not arranged an exclusive and permanent tenancy with them (pp. 56-60). What is meant by declericalization may become clearer if one remembers that the church of the future, in contrast to the pattern followed in a more recent past, is expected to grow from below, from groups of those who have come to believe as a result of their own free, personal decision (p. 111).⁵ In such cases the priest need not be celibate, if the right choice for a particular congregation at a particular time would be a leader who is married or free to marry (pp. 110, 51). As the "legitimate leader" of a local Christian community, this priest would also be that community's eucharistic leader (p. 113).⁶ It is not impossible, in the light of such a new secular situation, that a woman could be considered just as much as a man for such a leadership and therefore could be admitted to the priestly office (p. 114).⁷

Rahner is particularly interesting on ecumenism, because at many points his efforts to interpret the faith in the current

⁵ This is particularly the case in the "basic communities," or church communities which have built themselves up through free and spontaneous initiatives, in contrast to institutionalized church structures such as parishes with their legal and geographical bases (pp. 108-109). For a discussion of the relationship between these "basic communities" and "the episcopal great church," see pp. 109-111.

⁶ Rahner envisions the possibility of the existence in the congregation, i.e., among the laity, of strong charismatic personalities, whom the official priest-leader would respect as such, and who might very well exercise on the community an influence greater than his own (p. 113).

⁷ "Having in mind the society of today and even more of tomorrow, I see no reason in principle to give a negative answer to this question," specifies Rahner. At the same time, however, he considers that just as any other *local* leader, women priests would receive a "relative" rather than an "absolute" ordination (pp. 114, 110).

situation are just as challenging for Protestants and Eastern Orthodox as for Roman Catholics. If we seriously want to bring about the unity of the church, he affirms, we cannot wait until we have ironed out all theological and confessional divergences (p. 104).⁸ Nor does he consider the view that such a united church must necessarily include every possible type of Christian to be very realistic (p. 102). Why not try to establish first an *institutional* unity among the major Christian churches and look forward to a closer unity of faith as a result of this (pp. 104-105)? This should be all the easier, since this "institutional unification" need not mean institutional uniformity based on dogma as hitherto envisioned by the Roman Catholic tradition.

As to the role of the pope in this institutional unity, it is Rahner's conviction that "in the developing mentality of the future" the function of the papacy would be related to the maintenance of the unity of the church, while allowing considerable juridical autonomy to the "constituent churches" (pp. 104-105). Thus, Evangelical and Orthodox "partial churches" would admit a limited function for the Petrine ministry, and Roman Catholics continue to accept within their own area of such a united church a more exclusive and far-reaching concept of papal authority (pp. 105-106).

There are flashes and there are lapses in Rahner's achievement. One can appreciate his discussion of the church of the little flock. "We are a little flock in society and we shall become a much smaller flock, since the erosion of the preconditions of a Christian society within the secular society still continues and thus takes away the ground more and more from a traditional Christianity" (p. 31). One can also appreciate his treatment which views the "missionary offensive" as the only method of defense which promises success in preserving the Christian faith (p. 32). The possibility of winning new Christians from a

⁸ Especially since Rahner envisions the coming unity of the churches to be much more pluralistic in character, both theologically and institutionally, than Roman Catholics, for instance, have considered thus far (p. 102).

milieu that has become unchristian is the sole convincing evidence that even today Christianity has a real chance for the future.

On the other hand, Rahner's perception of the inevitability of a "monarchical head" in the united church to come seems oppressively one-sided (p. 53). Though he recognizes that the "concrete form" of the papacy is not simply identical with the essence of Christianity, he freely admits that Catholics simply cannot "have an impartial attitude to such an office" (pp. 53-54).⁹

While he acknowledges that "the Church cannot be a debating society," but "must be able to make decisions binding on all within it" (p. 54), Rahner's treatment of the problem of authority is generally unsatisfactory. It is timid and unimaginative.

His ecclesiological preoccupation, clearly present in this volume, has certainly received much impetus from the need to solve the problems at issue at and since the Second Vatican Council. As the theme of the book develops, it forms something of a keynote to what emerges as a strong delineated theological structure. He is not, to be sure, the first Catholic theologian to underline the importance of regarding the church as essentially sacramental in its nature.¹⁰ His originality consists rather in working out more fully the implications of this fact, in linking it with his famed anthropological principles,¹¹ and in systematically exploiting the dualism between the visible material sign and the spiritual reality which is signified. It is therefore not surprising

⁹ Rahner's high regard for the function of the papal office does not prejudice the issue of an appropriate and legal mode of appointing its *holder*. He emphasizes particularly a greater collaboration of those who are affected by such an appointment (pp. 119-122).

¹⁰ The term "sacramental" connotes the relationship between the charismatic order of grace and its external sign and cause in the institutional order.

¹¹ It is with the help of the anthropological principles formulated in his densely argued philosophical essay *Geist in Welt* (1939) that Rahner has gone on to show in his later works how a positive solution of major theological problems can be derived from the philosophical analysis of the Christian's constitutive spiritual and material elements. The tension between charismatic and institutional elements in the church is parallel to the tension within the individual between the inner spiritual reality and the external material act.

that when he comes to discuss particular problems in the life and constitution of the church, he should base his thought on this dualism, on the tension that must always exist between the charismatic and institutional in the church as in the individual. Just as his spiritual theology hinges on the tension between the inner spiritual reality and its exterior material expression, so Rahner's ecclesiology hinges on the distinction between the interior charismatic order of grace and its external sign and cause in the institutional order. Consequently not all authentic religious inspiration originates from the hierarchy which, in the exercise of its mission to rule, teach, and sanctify, is not necessarily inspired. To demand such would be, in the Rahnerian system, contrary to the freedom of God's Spirit in the church (pp. 110-113, 58-60).

Still, to academic theologians, in spite of their surprising insight into the significance of accepted positions, many of Rahner's views will look vulnerable, often surprisingly unsubstantiated. Seldom does he take the time to do more than sketch the general outline of a specific theological argument¹² or indicate the overall viability of some new reading of the Catholic theological tradition.¹³ Even in the longer chapters,¹⁴ Rahner's achievements do not lie in those feats of detailed historical analysis that are necessary for cogency in theological argument. They are to be found rather in his concern to explain the meaning of the Christian revelation with reference to the civilization of western Europe in the late 20th century. Significant, too, is the fact that in the booklet under review there is enchantingly little of the unremitting demands that Rahner's frequent parentheses and

¹² The 136-page booklet counts an author's preface and 18 chapters, the most elaborate of which is 11 pages long.

¹³ As in the case, for instance, of the author's distinction between "absolute" and "relative" ordination, the latter being applicable to leaders of basic communities (pp. 110, 112); or his recommendation of "basic communities" over against the existing parochial structures (pp. 108, 109, 115).

¹⁴ "Analysis of the Situation" (pp. 19-28), "Open Church" (pp. 93-101), and "Church from the Roots" (pp. 108-118).

unwieldily syntactical structures usually make on his reader's intellectual energies.¹⁵

Rahner's booklet, of course, is far from being an exhaustive treatment of the theme it considers. Many will find it too conservative, and others may consider it altogether too progressive, too liberal. If liberal be taken to mean "unconservative," it does not seem to be a very apt characterization of *The Shape of the Church to Come*. Rahner seems to be much more anxious to extract the deep religious significance of the traditional Catholic positions—scholastic in particular—than to break away from them. Such liberal tendencies as are to be discerned in this volume stem from his pastoral interests, from his preoccupation with concrete religious values. This again places him squarely in the tradition of Jesuit theologians.

Will Rahner's opuscle have an influence on the thinking of American Catholics? Does it have any affinity with American pragmatism? A comparison of current American transcendentalism with Rahner's transcendental metaphysics and theological anthropology would undoubtedly be intriguing. In any event, although more concerned with the factors that precipitated the apparent decline of the Catholic reform movement after Vatican II, such American Catholics as George Tavard,¹⁶ and more particularly Avery Dulles¹⁷ and Richard P. McBrien¹⁸ have recently been increasingly writing from the point of view of a more "universal" ecclesiology which, like Rahner's, is a more comprehensive appreciation of other approaches besides the traditional one. Besides, Rahner's own development as indicated

¹⁵ Although a few Rahnerian views remain perversely obscure in meaning and implication. Thus, for instance, his affirmation that the unity of the church we all seek, although pluralistic in character, cannot come as a result of arbitrarily reducing the number of Catholic dogmas, but only "through a really forward-looking fresh understanding of the whole substance of Catholic dogma" (pp. 102-103).

¹⁶ See his *Pilgrim Church* (New York, 1967), and *The Church Tomorrow* (New York, 1965).

¹⁷ *Models of the Church* (Garden City, N.Y., 1974).

¹⁸ *The Remaking of the Church* (New York, 1973).

in the booklet under review has led him toward a greater accenting of pluralism, a value esteemed in American thought. His greatest service, perhaps, has again been not so much in the content of this publication as in a model of method. The kind of thinking which Father Rahner engages in himself and stimulates in others is indispensable. His *Shape of the Church to Come* is instructive, explicatory, frightening—and necessary.