

UNCONDITIONAL SURRENDER AND LOVE

How Spirituality Illuminates the Theology of Karl Rahner

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IN PHILIPPIANS A BEAUTIFUL HYMN describes the descent of Jesus Christ, saying that he,

... who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness (Philippians 2: 6–7).

The words ‘emptied himself’ refer to the term *kenosis*, from the Greek verb κενωω. Jesus demonstrated throughout his life a humble and obedient attitude, which led him all the way to the cross. This attitude, based on love, can properly be called *kenotic*. In the introductory words of the hymn St Paul encourages the readers to attain the same attitude as Christ (Philippians 2:5). We should ‘empty ourselves’ as Christ did: an ongoing act with many connotations and implications. As with the self-giving act of Christ, human *kenosis* is obviously connected with unconditional love.

I would like to explore this connection as it is found in the thought and spirituality of Karl Rahner (1904–1984), one of the most influential theologians of the twentieth century. His immense and varied writings often demonstrate that reflective theology is dependent on spirituality and on lived experience. In this article I emphasize the importance of this relationship for understanding human *kenosis* and love.¹ While Rahner rarely speaks directly about *kenosis* as an attitude, there is still

¹ This article is based on my thesis research: see Ingvild Røsok: ‘Surrender to Life—A Systematic Theological Analysis of Human Kenosis in Karl Rahner’s Thoughts, with Reference to Ignatian Spirituality’, Norwegian School of Theology, 2010.

quite a lot about the issue in his work. Leo O'Donovan asserts *kenosis* to be a paradigm in Rahner's writings:

The paradigm, though I do not recall a text where Rahner explicitly notes this, is the *kenosis* (self-emptying) of Christ as described by St Paul in the hymn of Philippians 2: 5–11. To intimate the dynamics of this experience of self-domination, Rahner strained language to its limits, ringing changes on a range of words at once ordinary and poetic. He spoke of our giving ourselves to God, of surrendering ourselves, of giving or risking ourselves away, of denying ourselves, of no longer really disposing of ourselves, of letting oneself go, of no longer belonging to oneself.²

In order to understand the connection of *kenosis* to love, we have to start with a brief look at some foundational ideas in Karl Rahner's thought.

Starting with the Human

One characteristic feature of the work of Karl Rahner is to take the human being as a starting point for theology. His *transcendental* approach implies an investigation of the human being's conditions of having knowledge of God. Based on this, he claims a transcendent openness reaching beyond itself.³ According to Rahner the human being is constituted to receive the word of God, to receive God's self-communication. The fact that the human being always asks questions about origin and meaning is for Rahner a sign of transcendent openness to the mystery we name God. Furthermore, while grasping our finiteness, we become aware of and search for the infinite and absolute being that might encompass our finite being. This basic, transcendental experience implies openness towards God as the ground of our being. It is often 'unthematic': existing prior to our concrete experience. It is

² Leo J. O'Donovan, 'On Reading Rahner in a New Century', in *Finding God in All Things*, edited by Mark Bosco and David Stagaman (New York: Fordham, 2004), 141. German terms in parentheses omitted. In this part of his essay, Father O'Donovan treats the influence of Ignatian spirituality on Rahner.

³ Karl Rahner's use of the term 'transcendental' is very varied: in many ways he builds on the Kantian tradition, referring to an investigation of the subject's constitution, of what comes before the knowing. But he also often uses the term by drawing on the roots of the word *transcend*, which means to go beyond oneself and one's own knowledge. Thus he can speak of 'transcendental revelation' and 'transcendental experience'. For more on this, see Karen Kilby, *Karl Rahner—Theology and Philosophy* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 32–37.

important to keep in mind this transcendental mode of being in the world when investigating further the aspects of *kenosis* and love. The conditions for a human *kenosis* lie in this constitution of human nature and in the dynamic interplay between its necessary openness toward God and the free offer of God's self-communication.

The Universality of Surrender

Owing to the approach described above, Karl Rahner claims universality for the human being's relationship to God. Based on the belief that humanity is originally *one*,⁴ he asserts that self-transcendence towards the immediacy of God had to take place in at least one person to have universal significance—which happened when the absolute immediacy of God was actualised through Jesus Christ: '... the Incarnation itself is already an intrinsic moment and a *condition for the universal bestowal of grace* to spiritual creatures'.⁵ Although every person has the freedom to accept or reject this grace, Rahner seems to think that acceptance is almost universal, whether explicit or not.

According to Rahner it is only by a total surrendering to God that one really 'returns to self', which is another term for subjectivity:

... such radical self-discovery of the subject is possible in the unconditional surrender to the mystery which we call God—a surrender which comprehends the whole of existence.⁶

In abandoning itself to the mystery, the human being is actually returning to itself, realising the self:

It is its very *meaning*, and not just an accidental side activity which it could also do without, to be given away and to be handed over, to be that being who realizes himself and *finds himself by losing himself* once and for all in the incomprehensible.⁷

The words 'finds himself by losing himself' echo those of Jesus talking about the cost of following him (see Mark 8:35). Rahner sees this

⁴ See Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* (New York: Crossroad, 1978), 181–183.

⁵ Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 199, emphasis added.

⁶ Karl Rahner, 'Mystical Experience and Mystical Theology', *Theological Investigations*, electronic edition (Limerick: Mary Immaculate College, 2005), volume 17, 98.

⁷ Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 217, emphasis added.

abandonment not only as the meaning, but also as the real essence of human being's nature. This was demonstrated in the *kenosis* of Christ:

The Incarnation of God is the unique and *highest* instance of the actualization of the essence of human reality, which consists in this: that man is in so far as he abandons himself to the absolute mystery whom we call God.⁸

In other words: *to be is to abandon oneself*. If it is the real essence of human being to abandon oneself, then *kenosis* is to be seen as a fulfilment of human nature. The implied universality of these statements provides a first perspective on human *kenosis*: the human being is constituted to abandon itself to the mystery called God. This kind of abandonment is nevertheless not always a *conscious* relationship with God.

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Rahner's universalistic view of the human relationship with God has met with considerable objections. Hans Urs von Balthasar criticizes Rahner for what he regards as an excessively anthropologically orientated theology, in which faith seems to be watered down 'to a bland and shallow humanism'. Balthasar thinks that the theology of God's self-communication as universal makes Christ's cross superfluous. He is sceptical about 'modern' theology, such as Rahner's, which he finds too bland to be able to provide a motivation for a radical following of Christ, also including readiness for suffering.⁹ This critique might gain assent if we limited Rahner to the single perspective of transcendentalism. But I will argue that Rahner's theology should not be separated from his spirituality. Then we will find that, in encounter with Jesus Christ, human *kenosis* becomes radical and challenging.

Three Ignatian Keys to Kenosis: A Radical Surrender

The *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius of Loyola consists of a series of meditations, organized into four Weeks. Ignatius introduces the theme of surrender in his description of the purpose of the Exercises, which is

⁸ Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 218.

⁹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Moment of Christian Witness* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), 126. See also Declan Marmion, 'Karl Rahner and His Critics: Revisiting the Dialogue', *Irish Theological Quarterly*, 68 (2003), 195–212.

‘the overcoming of self and the ordering of one’s life on the basis of a decision made in freedom from any ill-ordered attachment’ (Exx 21). My intention here is not to present or discuss the *Spiritual Exercises* themselves, but rather to show how Karl Rahner’s spirituality gives another and radical perspective on surrender, working from talks given by him at Ignatian retreats.¹⁰ I have highlighted three exercises to exemplify radical surrender—three Ignatian keys to *kenosis*.

Indifference

The first key to *kenosis* is taken from the very beginning of the *Spiritual Exercises*. In the First Principle and Foundation the term ‘indifference’ is introduced: we ‘need to make ourselves indifferent to all created things ...’ in order to move ‘toward the end for which we are created’—which is to ‘praise, reverence and serve God Our Lord’ (Exx 23). Rahner is clear about the challenge of indifference. It has to be practised as a process, to be appropriated and integrated into all parts of one’s life. It demands an existential distance from things that enables the person to be freed from prejudice and to act accordingly. But because we actually love these ‘things’ we can never arrive at a perfect distance from them or from the world. Therefore we have to rely on God. ‘This active indifference is surrounded and protected by man’s humble *handing over of himself* to God’s good pleasure’, Rahner says.¹¹ To hand oneself over is the kenotic act that we are called to in the exercise of ‘The First Principle and Foundation’, and in any event throughout our lives, in order to undertake decisions according to the will of God.

Readiness

The second key to *kenosis* I find in the Call of the King. By meditating on Jesus as a king who needs help to conquer the world, one’s readiness for possible suffering is tested. The attitude of the follower is tested before any decisions regarding the concrete way of following are taken. Ignatius indicates the ‘*direction* my choice should follow, since he speaks of insults, injuries, poverty, and so forth’,¹² but only provided that Jesus is actually calling in this direction, because the issue is, right to the

¹⁰ See Karl Rahner, *Spiritual Exercises*, translated by Kenneth Baker (London: Sheed and Ward, 1967).

¹¹ Rahner, *Spiritual Exercises*, 24, emphasis added.

¹² Rahner, *Spiritual Exercises*, 134.



Karl Rahner

end, to search for the will of God. Keeping indifference in mind—one should not have any preferences, whether for injuries or health, friendship or insult—the question at stake here is rather *readiness*. At this crucial and decisive point in the Exercises it is, according to Rahner, ‘the readiness for the *kenosis* of the Lord Jesus Christ’ that should be revealed.¹³ It is notable that Rahner here uses the word *kenosis* to express the radical following of Jesus Christ. To be ready for this *kenosis* means to be prepared to go wherever God wants you to go, taking the risk of

possible suffering and even death. This clearly shows that Rahner understands *kenosis* as a radical surrender and not only as an unthematic, transcendental abandonment to the mystery.

Love

My third chosen exercise is the Contemplation to Attain Love, the very last exercise in the whole process (Exx 230–237). It demonstrates how closely *kenosis* is connected to love. The goal of this exercise is, for Rahner, the goal of the entire retreat. The love searched for is ‘the love of *surrender* to God and Christ’,¹⁴ and should be attained by contemplating things in the world as coming from God. But finding God in a seemingly cruel world depends on *meeting* God:

Finding God in all things and experiencing the transparence of things toward God is accomplished only by the person who meets

¹³ Rahner, *Spiritual Exercises*, 134, emphasis added.

¹⁴ Rahner, *Spiritual Exercises*, 271, emphasis added.

this God at that point where he descended into utter darkness and abandonment: on the cross of Jesus Christ!¹⁵

Rahner here connects the Ignatian principle of ‘finding God in all things’ with the descent of God into the world, the events of the incarnation and the cross. The love that is asked for in this contemplation can only be attained by accepting the truth of Christ, surrendering to him by sharing his mission. For Rahner this is not a contradiction but an actualisation of the transcendental approach of *kenosis*. We will now see how this twofold view of *kenosis* is reflected in and related to his thoughts on love.

The Transcendental Constitution of Love

Love of neighbour is often seen as being secondary to or a mere consequence of the love of God. This could, according to Rahner, wrongly lead to an understanding of charity as something that loses itself in the depths of the love of God. It is important to see that each of these two aspects of love ‘does not exist and cannot be understood or exercised without the other, and that two names have really to be given to the same reality if we are to summon up its one mystery’.¹⁶ In the effort to grasp this mystery, Rahner explores the nature of love. In the essay ‘Reflections on the Unity of the Love of Neighbour and the Love of God’ he unfolds this in rather technical terms, according to the transcendental constitution of the human being. I shall summarise and simplify his argument with the help of another essay, ‘Who are Your Brother and Sister?’¹⁷

Corresponding to the transcendental constitution of the subject, Rahner speaks of a transcendental constitution of love. While the structure of the subject enables it to classify and comprehend objects, it is simultaneously dependent on those objects. Without the encounter with *the other* no transcendental experience will come to be. Love is grounded in this encounter with the other, and is as such ‘the all-embracing act of man which gives meaning, direction and measure to

¹⁵ Rahner, *Spiritual Exercises*, 271–272.

¹⁶ Karl Rahner, ‘Reflections on the Unity of the Love of Neighbour and the Love of God’, *Theological Investigations*, volume 6, 232.

¹⁷ Karl Rahner, ‘Who Are Your Brother and Sister?’, in *The Love of Jesus and the Love of Neighbor* (New York: Crossroad, 1983).

everything else'.¹⁸ The love of the other is thus to be seen as the fulfilment of the transcendental nature of humanity.

On the other hand, this loving act could never take place without God's grace. The transcendental structure of the human being and its openness towards the other is brought about by God's self-communication. Thus, the movement towards the neighbour is simultaneously a movement towards God, thematically or not:

There is no love for God that is not, in itself, already a love for neighbor; and a love for God only comes to its own identity through its fulfillment in a love for neighbor. Only one who loves his or her neighbor can know who God actually is. And only one who ultimately loves God (whether he or she is reflexively aware of this or not is another matter) can manage unconditionally to abandon himself or herself to another person, and not make that person the means of his or her own self-assertion.¹⁹

Since the mutuality of the love of neighbour and the love of God is grounded in the constitution of the subject, it has an *ontological necessity* which makes it universal. This is in accordance with the universal aspect of *kenosis* mentioned above. Even the explicit act of loving God is borne by the love that takes place in the encounter with *the other*.²⁰ This is so because 'the *original* experience of God ... is always given in a "worldly" experience. This, however, is only present originally and totally in the communication with a "Thou".'²¹ There is, nevertheless, always the freedom of rejecting or accepting God's self-communication, which is expressed in the encounter with the other respectively as hatred or love of neighbour.

Owing to this universality and the ontological connection between the concrete act of love of neighbour and the primary act of loving God, Karl Rahner has been accused of 'undermining the absolute priority in Christianity of the love of God for us by "identifying" love of

¹⁸ Rahner, 'Reflections on the Unity of the Love of Neighbour and the Love of God', 241.

¹⁹ Rahner, 'Who Are Your Brother and Sister?', 71.

²⁰ '... even the explicit love of God is still borne by that opening in trusting love to the whole of reality which takes place in the love of neighbour. It is radically true, i.e. by an ontological and not merely "moral" or psychological necessity, that whoever does not love the brother whom he "sees", also cannot love God whom he does not see, and that one can love God whom one does not see only by loving one's visible brother lovingly.' (Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, volume 6, 247).

²¹ Rahner, 'Reflections on the Unity of the Love of Neighbour and the Love of God', 246.

God with love of neighbour'.²² I see this as a misunderstanding of Karl Rahner's overall concern with God's gratuitous self-communication, and suggest emphasizing the kenotic perspective of love to see how Rahner's transcendental and spiritual aspects mutually enrich each other. I shall make my case by considering the love and dependence of Jesus Christ.

Love as Unconditional Self-Abandonment

In *The Love of Jesus and the Love of Neighbor* we see how Karl Rahner regards love as an *act of kenosis* and how he connects the transcendental constitution of love with christology. In Jesus Christ the unity of love was fully realised. His self-surrender to God was concretely borne by his act of love towards the people for whose sake he willingly died. In our brief look at the *Spiritual Exercises* we saw how the radical challenge of following Jesus was dependent on a personal encounter, out of which a desire to follow him lovingly grows and ripens. Rahner describes the love for Jesus as something very real:

I think one can and must love Jesus, in all immediacy and concretion, with a love that transcends space and time, in virtue of the nature of love in general and by the power of the Holy Spirit of God.²³

To love Jesus is like loving another human being, and we have already seen that the love for him implies a total surrender. It is about a willingness to share even in his destiny of death.

How, then, is this radical love related to our concrete love of neighbour? In one way Karl Rahner claims that there is a fundamental difference between the genuine love for Jesus and the love between two persons in general. By contrast with love in general, love for Jesus is a *definitive* love. However radical and unconditional human love might *like* to be, it is marked by a reservation and a threat. It could scarcely be otherwise, Rahner says:

... if such earthly love, out of the will to unconditionality and definitiveness, were to seek to deny this inner sense of threat,

²² Marmion, 'Karl Rahner and His Critics', 196. Marmion refers to Hans Urs von Balthasar, but without providing the specific source.

²³ Rahner, *The Love of Jesus and the Love of Neighbor*, 23.

it would be basically denying its own nature. It would be inauthentic.²⁴

The wish to love unconditionally meets its limit because surrendering totally to another person implies the absurd risk of following that person even to hell. The only person who can really be loved unconditionally is the one who possesses the divine characteristics found in Jesus Christ. In him, we have 'the only one who can be loved with absolute security and reliability ... who possesses the purity and unconditionality and who is totally accepted and united with God'.²⁵ Hence, a love for Jesus cannot be compared to the absurdity of the willingness to surrender as far as damnation.

Nevertheless, if the love of neighbour is to be seen as being in unity with the love of Jesus, then the absurdity of loving surrender to a human person has to be questioned. According to the Gospel of St John, Jesus' command is to love each other as he did and to 'lay down one's life for one's friends' (John 15:12–13). In so far as the kenotic act of Jesus is sufficient for the universal bestowal of grace, is it not possible that interhuman love might be definitive—at least to the extent that the person who is to be loved is united to God?

Karl Rahner gives a rather brief reflection on this by asserting that Jesus can be loved *anonymously*. On the one hand, he confirms that it is only with and through Jesus that we have the absolute affirmation of God's irreversible love for the world. If then, one loves a human being as someone in radical union with God, either reservation prevails or the love will be absolute, but existing under the condition that God has 'embraced and assumed this loved person in the absolute affirmation he has bestowed upon Jesus (and upon him alone)'.²⁶ The problem remains that in this life one can never be certain of this affirmation. On the other hand, such unconditional human love can still be experienced. Rahner says:

Where love can really abandon all reservations, definitively and with absolute assurance, where love can really live out to the last

²⁴ Rahner, *The Love of Jesus and the Love of Neighbor*, 40.

²⁵ '... [This] unconditionality [of love] must precisely include a reservation, since no one is permitted to dare to wish to go to hell with another. Such a wish would destroy the basis of this love—destroy its very roots.' (Rahner, *The Love of Jesus and the Love of Neighbor*, 42.)

²⁶ Rahner, *The Love of Jesus and the Love of Neighbor*, 43.

its most proper, most original nature as unconditional self-giving and surrender to the other, there Jesus is 'co-loved' as the Ground of this love—even where the blessed Name is as yet altogether unknown to the one who loves.²⁷

In spite of a certain ambiguity in Rahner at this point, the passage could be suggesting that loving one's neighbour is no longer constricted or conditioned since Jesus Christ is the Ground of definitive love, even when this is not known to the one who loves. Without God's irreversible love and Jesus' *kenosis* it would be meaningless and absurd to abandon oneself to another person. This would put a different perspective on the unity of loving God—or Jesus—and loving your neighbour: by loving someone unconditionally, you are actually embraced by the love of Jesus. A reading like this corresponds to the parable of Jesus in Matthew 25 that concludes: 'Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me' (Matthew 25:40).

This interpretation leaves us with the question of the risk that Rahner speaks of. If the act of unconditional love of a human being utterly rests on God's affirmation of Jesus Christ, even without this being known, what then is the risk of love? Of course there will always be emotional risk but, as I understand ontological christology, we are destined to love our neighbour unconditionally. By establishing 'anonymous love' Rahner does, in my opinion, evade the risky element of love, establishing a christological basis for unconditional love of the neighbour. Jesus Christ has brought God's irreversible love to the world; he is the one who is to be loved and followed radically. The 'risk' that remains is the feeling of losing control when giving oneself over to the unknown mystery, while the whole act of love is borne by grace, marked by a promise of everlasting life.

In exploring some specific aspects of Karl Rahner's spirituality I have shown here that a twofold approach to *kenosis* and love provides a deep conviction of the total, comprehensive love of God for all people. By defining love as transcendental, Karl Rahner shows how love and grace are intertwined, since God thus enables us to love. This love is a love of surrender both to God and to our neighbour. While there are numerous reasons for people in the world not to relate

²⁷ Rahner, *The Love of Jesus and the Love of Neighbor*, 44.

consciously to the Christian God, every person who really encounters God in Christ is met by the challenge of a radical surrender to the cross. That is the only way to the real self—the Surrender to Life.

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