

Commentary and Rejoinder

AS I READ and re-read Professor Joseph Pappin's review of Karl Rahner's *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, in the Spring 1981 *Modern Age*, I was wondering why the reviewer is so impressed by the German theologian's scanty and questionable achievements. The reason may be the vogue of phenomenology in our philosophy departments; for Rahner, rather clumsily, tries to adapt the Husserlian method to the discourse about God—without succeeding since for Husserl the self never *knows* the object, it only knows *itself* in the process of attempting to know it. Thus phenomenology is not an instrument for attaining knowledge about the object of religion,—God—, it can only make statements about the believer or the unbeliever. Hence its tremendous popularity among modern theologians whose doubts it camouflages.

This stopping short before the knowledge of God is illustrated by Pappin's (and Rahner's) abundant use of the term "experience," the believer's experiencing himself as a knower, but never actually being a knower. Here we have Pappin's own words: "...this 'transcendental experience' is really an experience of transcendence, an experience of the knowing and willing subject as an actual dynamism having as its term no finite object, but possessing an infinite openness toward absolutely all of reality.... This term of transcendence is an ever present horizon of our existence often only implicitly grasped." Like many of his modern colleagues, Rahner cannot bring himself to speak of Jesus as God, but of "Jesus' transcendental experience," and of his consciousness in which he learns "new and surprising experiences."

Having such vacillating religious certitudes, modern theologians attach themselves to the certitudes (?) of the world. Pappin quotes Rahner as warning against yielding to just such blandishments, but Rahner's own record speaks otherwise. In at least two of his works, *Free Speech in the Church* and *The Christian*

Commitment, Rahner is hardly distinguishable from his more primitive confreres. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Bishop John A. T. Robinson (an Anglican), and the inimitable Hans Küng. His own fascination with the coming political and other mutations is as boundless as theirs. Let us note items from Rahner's thought: the Christian message is irrelevant to the modern world; a planetary state is forced just now into being; a technological age is upon us; etc. And conversely, he is happy to denounce the "pseudo-Gothic décor" of Christian religious life; the ghetto in which Christians live; the "mere sociological fact of old peasant women attending Mass"; etc. Rahner is as morbidly jubilant, as was Maritain, over the signs that Catholics now live in a diaspora and that the Church has become a mere corner of the secular society, a hard master.

All in all, even excluding his agnosticism before the transcendent, and therefore before God and his incarnation, Rahner is a mediocre thinker, one whose glitter in the sixties and seventies was a borrowed light from the shortlived hopes of a honeymoon between Church and World. He was one of the so-far isolated priests who could not resist the mundane popularity brought by the dialogue, the ecumenism, and the TV-interviews. All these do not add up to his being a major thinker.

—THOMAS MOLNAR

I AM GRATEFUL to Professor Thomas Molnar for his comments and for the opportunity to reply to his criticisms. Yet the manner of his comments hardly serves to clarify the complexity of Rahner's thought, nor provides the objectivity required to treat the same. To lump Rahner freely with de Chardin and Küng, both having been reprimanded by the Church, appears forced. And what is the basis for his being linked with Bishop Robinson, himself having apparently mellowed in his fascination with the authenticity of Scripture? As for Rahner's mediocrity being evidenced by a search for popularity through dialogue, ecumenism, and TV-interviews, this

charge is too vague to allow reply. Concerning "some items from Rahner's thought," I can only plead perplexity over what Molnar could possibly mean by these items, and over the context of their occurrence. Does Molnar imply that Rahner dismisses Christianity as "irrelevant to the modern world"? Then I wonder if we are speaking of the same person. Taking only one work, Rahner's *Spiritual Exercises*, we find a sustained attempt to show that Christianity is not only relevant but essential to the world today.

But more to the point. Doesn't the scandal of Rahner for his detractors lie in his transcendental method? I assume that it is this method that leads Molnar to lump Rahner with Husserl and phenomenology. I am familiar with this charge being made against Cardinal Wojtyla (Pope John Paul II), especially as the author of *The Acting Person*, in which he makes use of the method of phenomenology, while distinguishing his own method from that of Husserl. But I wonder about the basis for the charge that Rahner adapts "the Husserlian method to the discourse about God." The proper antecedents for Rahner's thought are almost universally acknowledged by scholars to be the Alexandrian Church Fathers, Augustine, Bonaventure and Aquinas; Kant and Hegel; Blondel, Rousselot, and Marechal; Fichte and Heidegger. An imposing list, yet Husserl is not included. In fact, Husserlian phenomenologists who place heavy emphasis upon description and transcendental constitution, stand in opposition to Rahner's theory of abstraction, tinged as it so thoroughly is with the Thomistic elements of phantasm, intelligible species, agent and possible intellect, the cogitative sense, which are hardly staples of Husserlian phenomenology.

Finally, and more crucially, consider the charge regarding "Rahner's agnosticism before the transcendent" and his reluc-

tance "to speak of Jesus as God." If "transcendental experience" for Rahner means knowing the knower alone, then solipsism is the result and, at best, ignorance of God is the consequence. Knowledge may be transcendental, as for Kant, but it certainly is not transcendent, and it definitely is immanent and *a priori*. But Rahner states that our knowledge of God is *a posteriori*, as does Aquinas, resulting from our encounter with the world of which we ourselves are a part. Two points emerge for Rahner in his understanding of transcendental experience. First, co-present with every act of knowing, the subject is present to itself, conscious of itself as the one who knows. For this to occur, though, the subject must encounter the world, materially and spiritually. Second, in every act of knowing (and willing and loving) the subject experiences an openness beyond any finite object of knowledge. The expanse of the subject is towards an inexhaustible "more" that signals the presence of infinity necessarily in every act of knowing. (Cf. both Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, I, 43, para. 10, and Orestes Brownson, *The Works of Orestes A. Brownson*, Volumes 1 and 2, who also maintained that God was co-present in every act of knowing as the necessary and ideal term of knowledge). The term of this transcendental experience is God, first known unthematically as unfathomable mystery and then, when so permitted to enter fully into one's consciousness, known explicitly and thematically as God.

Rahner indeed speaks of Jesus as God and as man. Isn't this the mystery of the incarnation, that God is eternal and unchanging, yet the Word *became* flesh, asks Rahner? For Rahner, Jesus is the God-man; anything less or more violates the Church's own divinely given dogma.

—JOSEPH PAPPIN III

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