“Anonymous Christian”?

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Introduction: “Anonymous Christian” – A Controverted Term of Karl Rahner

Karl Rahner (1904‒1984)1) is doubtless one of the most significant and influential Catholic theologians of the 20th century. He is also of consequence for the Church of the 21st century, since at Vatican II, which was a council of the “world-Church (Weltkirche),”2) he played a decisive role as a “peritus” or official theological consultant, and exerted a major influence over the drafting of many of the conciliar documents. In fact, his theological traces may be detected in almost all conciliar documents including the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium)*, the golden jubilee of which we celebrate this year.

Despite the fact that since his death in 1984 his name has gradually faded into oblivion, yet it still often merits mention and he is frequently the target of criticism,

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1) The following works of Karl Rahner are cited as follows: *Theological Investigations* (TI), 23, (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1961‒1992); *Schriften zur Theologie* (STh), 16, (Zürich: Benzinger, 1954‒1984); *Sämtliche Werke* (SW), 32, (Freiburg i.Br.: Herder, 1995‒).
especially in discussions concerning the theology of religions. The central concept that has been focused upon in Rahner’s theology is that of the “anonymous Christians (anonyme Christen)” or “anonymous Christianity (anonymes Christentum).”3) The theory of the “anonymous Christian” is possibly both “the most celebrated and most controversial theme of the Rahnerian corpus,”4) partly owing to false impressions or misunderstandings and partly because of a fundamental problem within the concept.5)

In the following lines I wish to probe this concept of “anonymous Christian” in order to clarify what Rahner meant exactly by the term, and see what really mattered for him.

1. The Theological Foundation of the “Anonymous Christian”

1.1. “Supernatural Existential”

The term “supernatural existential (übernatürliches Existential),” which is the point of departure of Rahner’s theology, is of great value in understanding him, for the concept of “anonymous Christianity” or “anonymous Christian” is a theological outcome of this term. Since the concept of “supernatural existential” is based on


Rahner’s understanding of the relationship between grace and nature, one therefore needs to consider the questions of nature and grace, as the theological foundation of the term “anonymous Christian.”

In a traditional presentation of scholastic theology, grace is seen as something added to human beings. Grace is seen as a “mere superstructure (bloßer Überbau),” for here it is nothing but an extrinsic addition to human nature. Human nature is then seen as a twofold stratum consisting of dual elements, namely nature and grace. Against such “extrinsecism (Extrinsecismus),” Rahner introduces the term “supernatural existential” to denote this fundamental human nature, thereby stressing the intrinsic unity of nature and grace.

“Pure nature (pura natura)” or nature without grace is only a theoretically conceived abstract possibility for human beings. The factual situation of human beings is that they are always graced, and never purely natural. This graced human nature is a reality preceding all human decisions. This graced nature determines the human being, but not in an a priori mode, for grace is bestowed on a human being in the way whereby one can either accept or reject it. This distinction between “pure nature” and “supernatural existential” corresponds to the distinction between “created (geschafene)” and “uncreated (ungeschaffene)” grace in scholastic theology.

Thus Rahner maintained a distance also from “New Theology (Nouvelle Théologie),” which identified pure nature with graced nature, thereby safeguarding the gratuity and freedom of grace, God’s gracious presence in the world through his Spirit. Hence “supernatural existential” is not identical with “obediential potency (potentia oboedientialis),” which is a passive potency of human beings for God.

6) K. Rahner, “Concerning the Relationship between Nature and Grace”, TI 1, 297–315, at 298 (STh 1, 324).
7) Ibid.
this sense the concept of “supernatural existential” is another expression for God’s grace dwelling within human existence.

1.2. Gratia Christi – Grace as God’s Self-Communication in Christ

Rahner understands grace as God’s “self-communication (Selbstmitteilung)” in Christ. The concept of “supernatural existential” is the same as “God’s communication of himself to man.”

He also speaks about the same thing under a different aspect. Based on the biblical belief of God’s universal will of salvation (der allgemeine Heilswille Gottes) (1Tm 2,4), Rahner stresses God’s will to save all men. God is at work everywhere in the world, even outside the Church. He goes on to say that God is active even in non-Christian religions. To put it Christologically, the work of Christ is not confined to the Church. Christ is at work everywhere in the world, going beyond the boundaries of the Church. Therefore one can never draw a clear line of the operative presence of Christ in the world.

Rahner thus opened a door to the theological possibility of salvation for non-Christians. Based on the operative presence of Christ in other religious traditions, Rahner call this hidden and unknown operative presence of Christ outside the Church as “anonymous Christianity,” and in order to understand this concept of “anonymous Christianity,” one should not overlook its Christocentric character.

2. “Anonymous Christian”

2.1. Christ in the Concept of “Anonymous Christian”

The point of departure of the concept “anonymous Christian” can be found in Rahner’s article: Membership of the Church according to the Teaching of Pius XII’s

10) K. Rahner, “Some Implications of the Scholastic Concept of Uncreated Grace”, TI 1, 324 (STh 1, 352).
Encyclical ‘Mystici Corporis Christi’ (1947), but the term “anonymous Christian” appears first in his article entitled Poetry and the Christian (1960).

Rahner speaks of God’s “self-communication” in Christ. To put it in line with the traditional scholastic terminology of causality, Christ is not the efficient cause, but the “final cause (Finalursache / causa finalis)” of salvation. Christ is not the cause in the sense that he brings about God’s self-communication, he is the cause in the sense that he is the “goal” of God’s self-communication.

According to the testimony of the New Testament, there is no other salvation apart from Christ, who is the only mediator of salvation (1Tm 2,5; Ac 4,12). To use the traditional axiom, it can be formulated as “Extra Christum nulla salus” (“There is no salvation apart from Christ.” / “Außerhalb von Christus kein Heil.”). In this sense Christ is the constitutive cause of salvation. “But God desires the salvation of everyone. And this salvation willed by God is the salvation won by Christ.” The Christian faith based on the New Testament should never concede

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12) K. Rahner, “Poetry and the Christian”, TI 4, 357–367, at 366, (STh 4, 452f.; SW 12, 449): “There is such a thing as anonymous Christianity (ein anonymes Christentum). There are men who merely think that they are not Christians, but who are in the grace of God. And hence there is an anonymous humanism (ein anonym begnadetes Humanes) inspired by grace, which thinks that it is no more than human.” Parentheses added.
this singularity of Christ. Christ is the “norma normans non normata (the norming
norm that is not normed or “the norm above all other norms”17).” In this sense the
concept of “anonymous Christian” does not relativize the explicit and conscious faith
in Jesus Christ.

Pluralist theologians see the fundamental limits of “anonymous Christian”
precisely in the Christocentric character of the term.18) Yet, Hans Küng who
severely criticizes the concept, regards Jesus as the “archetypal (maßgebend).”19)
“The special feature, the most fundamental characteristic of Christianity is that it
considers this Jesus as ultimately decisive, definitive, archetypal, for man’s relations
with God, with his fellow man, and with society: in the curtailed biblical formula as
“Jesus Christ”. ” Based on the normativity of Christ, Hans Küng goes on to say
that Christianity is a “critical catalyst and crystallization point(Katalysator und
Kristallisationspunkt)” for the world religions. “Christi

17) cf. Paul F. Knitter, No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Toward the World
Religions, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2003), 134.
18) cf. Ibid., 128; “Therefore – here the limits are defined – the religions, for all the “supernatural
elements” they may contain, are incomplete until they come to know and embrace Christ. Only in
him can they find their true identity and the fullness of salvation.” See also P. F. Knitter,
Introducing Theologies of Religions, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2003), 74f.
19) H. Küng, On Being a Christian, 123 (H. Küng, Christ sein, 115), emphasis original.
20) Ibid., 112(Ibid., 104), emphasis original.
21) Jacques Dupuis, Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis,
Rahner’s position may be termed inclusivism in the sense of the inclusiveness of Christ, but not in the sense of Christianity as a religion.

It should then be asked whether it is adequate to use the terms “anonymous Christian” or “anonymous Christianity”, which are terms related to membership in an explicit Church. One uses the word “Christian” in the sense of membership in an explicit Church. The term “Christian” is nothing other than a notion of explicit religiosity, even if the adjective “anonymous” is added. One should then speak of the universal presence of the “anonymous Christ (anonymer Christus)” in the world, even outside the explicit Church (cf. Heb 13,12), rather than being an “anonymous Christian (anonyme Christen),” which is related to membership in the explicit Church. Yet Rahner makes no clear distinction between the universal presence of Christ in the world and the term “Christian” in the sense of explicit Christianity, which requires an explicit profession of faith in the name of Jesus Christ (Rom 10,9f.).22)

2.2. The Church in the Concept of “Anonymous Christian”

Rahner stresses the fact that “God is greater than man and the Church.”23) Although Christ and the Church are inseparably linked (Eph 1,22), the Church cannot be identified with Christ. Christ is always superior to the Church. The operative presence of Christ goes beyond the boundaries and the membership of the explicit Church.

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22) cf. H. Küng, On Being a Christian, 126 (H. Küng, Christ sein, 118); “To anyone who thinks a little about the two words anonymous Christianity is a contradiction in terms, like wooden iron [ein hölzernes Eisen]. Being humanly good is a fine thing even without the blessing of the Church or theological approval. Christianity however means a profession of faith in this one name.” Parenthesis added. See also Heinrich Schlier, Der Christ und die Welt, GuL 38 (1965), 416–428, at 428; E. Jüngel, “Extra Christum nulla salus als Grundsatz natürlicher Theologie?”, 122f.

Still Rahner maintains the necessity of the Church for salvation. The Church as the body of Christ has the task to proclaim Christ (Rom 10,14), as Vatican II stresses. “Indeed, she [the Catholic Church] proclaims, and ever must proclaim Christ” (NA 2,2). The Church is “the continuation of the mystery of Christ, his permanent visible presence in our history.”24) Vatican II understands the Church as “the sacrament of salvation” in the sense that “the Church will not so much regard herself today as the exclusive community of those who have a claim to salvation, but rather as the historically tangible vanguard, and historically and socially constituted explicit expression of what the Christian hopes is present as a hidden reality, even outside the visible Church.”25) Therefore it is not proper to affirm that the concept of “anonymous Christian” relativizes the significance of the explicit Church.

The concept of “anonymous Christian” does not undermine the significance of the missionary work of the Church either. This missionary work is directed towards the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ who came to the world solely to save people (Jn 3,16). Hence the raison d’être of the Church does not lie in the expansion of the Church, but in the service for the people, as Vatican II stresses. “[…] the Church seeks but a solitary goal: to carry forward the work of Christ under the lead of the befriending Spirit, and Christ entered this world to give witness to the truth, to rescue and not to sit in judgment, to serve and not to be served.” (GS 3,2).

The traditional axiom on the subject of membership in the Church is: “Extra Ecclesiam nulla salus” (“There is no salvation outside the Church.”),26) which is generally thought to originate with Cyprian of Carthage (c. 200-258).27) When this

27) cf. Cyprian of Carthage, De unitate Ecclesiae, 6 (PL 4, 503); Cyprian, Epistula, 73 (CChr.SL 3c, 555).
teaching was pronounced at the Council of Florence (1438–1445), it was understood literally in the sense that salvation was restricted to baptized members of the Church.28) Since then the import of the teaching has gradually changed, and one can witness a most important breakthrough in Pius XII’s document (1949), which refutes Leonard Feeney’s rigorous understanding of the axiom.29) The possibility of salvation outside the Church was later officially admitted at Vatican II (cf. LG 16),30) and yet Rahner does not believe that the traditional axiom was simply abolished. He continues to maintain the traditional axiom as “Extra Ecclesiam nulla salus”, in the sense of the necessity of the Church for salvation.31) In this sense the traditional axiom should not be viewed as a purely pessimistic stance, concerning salvation outside the Church.

3. Is “Anonymous Christian” a Term Offensive to Non-Christian Believers?

One of the most frequent objections to the concept of “anonymous Christian” is the following: The concept “anonymous Christian” is offensive to non-Christian believers.32) To state that the terminology is just an internal language directed to fellow Christians, is no excuse. One needs to see whether it is really offensive to them.

What is clear is non-Christians would not be happy with the phrase. They would not accept recognition as quasi-Christians, living within their own religious traditions. In point of fact however there appears to be no exaggeration in what Hans Küng

29) cf. DH 3866–3873.
31) Ibid., 391(Ibid., 545f.; Ibid., 284).
declares, when he writes as follows. “Anyway, in reality, they – Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and all the others, who know quite well that they are completely “unanonymous (unanonym)” – remain outside. Nor have they any wish to be inside. And no theological sleight of hand will ever force them, against their will and against their desire, to become active or passive members of this Church – which in fact still seeks to be a free community of faith.”33)

In his work entitled The One Christ and the Universality of Salvation Rahner describes a dialogue with Keiji Nishitani (西谷啓二) (1900–1990), the well known Japanese Buddhist religious philosopher.34) The dialogue should be helpful to understand Rahner’s true intention concerning the concept “anonymous Christians”. To begin with, Nishitani asked Rahner, “What would you say to my treating you as an anonymous Zen Buddhist?” Compared to this crucial question of Nishitani’s the reply given by Rahner is relatively unknown. He declared, “certainly you may and should do so from your point of view; I feel myself honored by such an interpretation; […]” Rahner stressed the fundamental identity of both religions, by stating as follows: “To be a genuine Zen Buddhist is identical with being a genuine Christian”, though it is clear that “a Buddhist is not a Christian and a Christian is not a Buddhist.” Nishitani was also satisfied with Rahner’s reply, since he stated: “Then on this point we are entirely at one.” This dialogue reveals that the question did not concern the religious belief that a person followed, but rather, the fundamental unity of both religions.

What matters in Rahner’s concept of the “anonymous Christian” is the universality of God’s grace in Christ, by which all human beings are touched. This conviction regarding the universality of God’s grace in Christ is based on the Christian biblical understanding of history, wherein Christ is the center and culmination of history.35) In this Christian biblical understanding of history (cf. Rom


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1,2; 1Cor 15,3b-4), one can make a distinction between the pre-Christian and post-Christian era. Similarly when it comes to salvation, one can speak of pre-Christian and extra-Christian salvation.36)

Rahner goes on to apply a dichotomous terminology of an implicit and explicit Christianity to this Christocentric understanding of the history.37) He sees the fullness of Christianity in explicit Christianity. “Alongside this there is the fullness of Christianity which has become conscious of itself explicitly in faith and in hearing the words of the Gospel, in the Church’s profession of faith, in the sacraments, and in living an explicit Christian life, which knows that it is related to Jesus of Nazareth.”38) In this case an implicit and anonymous Christianity that signifies other religious traditions, is inferior to explicit Christianity. The particular problem in the concept of “anonymous Christian” arises in this identification of the Christocentric understanding of the history with the religious sociological notion of “Christianity.” This identification necessarily leads to an inclusive understanding of Christianity as religion that can be understandably regarded as religious imperialism, and which is also offensive to non-Christian believers.

Conclusion

With the concept of “anonymous Christians” Karl Rahner stresses the operative presence of Christ in the world that transcends the boundaries of the explicit Church. He thus paved a way for a new understanding of the Church that is open

35) P. F. Knitter, Introducing Theologies of Religions, 75. To the fulfillment theory which understands Christ as the fulfillment of the history see also Jacques Dupuis, Christianity and the Religions. From Confrontation to Dialogue, trans. Phillip Berryman, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002), 47ff.
38) Ibid.
to the world, including to non-Christian religions. This new understanding of the Church is adequately called “the open Church.” This understanding of the Church can make a border of the Church ambiguous, but one cannot draw a line between the inside and the outside of the Church, since the Church as the body of Christ is there where Christ is at work.

What matters for Rahner is primarily the universal presence of Christ in the world. This does not diminish the significance of the explicit Church as the sacrament of salvation, as Christ and the Church are inseparably connected to each other. Still, the Church cannot be identified with Christ, as Christ is always superior to the Church. The identification of Christ with the Church necessarily leads to religious universalism, or imperialism of Christianity as a religion.

Rahner’s use of the term “anonymous Christian” is not fully adequate to express the operative presence of Christ in human beings outside the Church, as the term does not express the inclusive presence of Christ, but rather Christianity as an inclusive religion. It can lead to religious universalism, even if Rahner did not intend to grant any privilege to Christianity with the concept of “anonymous Christian.” In this sense the term “anonymous Christian” can be seen as not merely infelicitous but problematic. One cannot derive an implicit or explicit membership in the Church, from the universal will of God to save all human beings in Christ.