Freedom and Eschatology:
The Contribution of Karl Rahner and Hans Urs von Balthasar to the Question of Human Freedom in the Eschatological Fulfillment

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1. Introduction

The subject of this treatise is the question of the role of human freedom in the eschatological fulfillment. In the final and definitive encounter with God is human freedom capable of decisions which are still relevant for human salvation? First of all, I would like to present a brief sketch about the contributions of Karl Rahner
and Hans Urs von Balthasar with regard to this question. Both, Rahner and von Balthasar, belong to the most important theologians for the renewal of Catholic theology in the last century. Their influence on eschatology is remarkable. In the neo-scholastic theology of the pre-Vatican II era, the treatise on eschatology – called ‘De Novissimis’ (On the last things) – was a harmless appendix to the theological curriculum in which the biblical eschatological statements were taken as realistic descriptions and as a report on what was going to happen in the future. Rahner’s essay on ‘The hermeneutics of eschatological assertions’ is one of the most significant contributions in catholic theology for the renewal of the neo-scholastic concept of eschatology. Central in Rahners hermeneutical framework is the thesis that the source of all eschatological knowledge is the present situation in the history of salvation caused by God’s salvific action and self-communication in Christ. Thus Christology is the basic hermeneutical principle for all eschatological assertions. Eschatology is “not a supplementary piece of information added to dogmatic anthropology and Christology, but simply there as transposition into the guise of fulfillment”

Hans Urs von Balthasar shares this Christocentric concentration of eschatology. He criticizes the neoscholastic vision of ‘last things’ when he maintains: God in his self-revelation in Christ “is the Last Thing of the creature. Gained, He is paradise; lost, He is hell; as demanding, He is judgment; as cleansing, He is purgatory”. The traditional doctrine of the eschatological “things” – final judgment, purgatory, heaven and hell – has to be understood in terms and categories of a personal relationship and qualitatively not as temporally distinct moments of the definitive encounter of the single person and the entire humankind with God. As a


consequence of this hermeneutical framework based on personal categories contemporary theology is confronted with the question about the role of human freedom in the eschatological fulfillment. What follows:

- First, I would like to sketch Rahner’s anthropologic and christocentric vision of eschatology: the question of human freedom gets relevant especially in the theology of death and the conception of purgatory.
- Secondly, I focus on von Balthasars theodramatic vision of eschatology: here the question of human freedom is raised in the doctrine of the final judgment and Christ’s descent into hell.
- And finally, I would draw some brief conclusions on the role of freedom in the eschatological fulfillment.

2. Rahner’s anthropological vision of eschatology

2.1. The problem of the definitiveness of human death

Christian faith sees death as the end of the human being’s earthly pilgrimage and the beginning of an unchangeable eternal destiny. The traditional doctrine of death as the end of the pilgrim’s state developed, in the history of theology, inexorable and unmerciful forms.4) Death in the traditional understanding signifies the end of all human actions and decisions relevant for salvation. The existence of the human being and his choices reach a definitive form in death. Therefore penance and conversion become impossible for the dead. The German sociologist of religion Michael N. Ebertz points out in a study of the nineteenth-century conceptions of the afterworld church proclamation maintained an irreversibility of moral-religious state of human beings.5) The divine attributions of mercy and justice are divided at the

boundary between life and death. While God can show his mercy to the sinner until the moment of death, God fulfills only his justice after the death of the human being. Through death life becomes irrevocably fixed in a certain state of good or bad. The dead do not have the freedom to change their decisions. In judging the human soul God wants only to exercise his justice not his mercy.

Following Martin Heidegger Rahner argues that death must be understood as a personal act.6) Rahner sees a link between human death, freedom, time and eternity.7) Human freedom, according to Rahner’s transcendental anthropology, is more than the possibility to choose between different options. Freedom is basically the capacity of the person to determine and to realize oneself in a definitive way.8) Every human being realizes through the history of choices and decisions one’s single and unique form as a subject and person. Human freedom is realized both categorically through the single choice and particularly through choices in human life and transcendentally in relation to God as the horizon of absolute Goodness in


which every particular good is chosen. In this view of freedom death plays a decisive role: Only through death — and not after death — a final validity and meaning of human existence is achieved. Only through death is human freedom capable of realizing something definitive and irrevocable. Death according to Rahner ends time by being its consummate validity and therefore eternity. Eternity is deeply misunderstood in terms of an endless temporal sequence; eternity is rather the consummation and definitiveness of time, the mature fruit of time.

But what happens if human beings fall short of their own possibilities “and leave unrealized in the individual acts of one’s life what could be realized at this moment in the sphere of moral maturing”? What if the things definitively realized during one’s lifetime remain incomplete and fragmented? Do we have to admit that a human person remains reduced to an “eternal truncation” and fixed to a state of eternal incompleteness? Rahner asks if we are forced to regret in eternity what we failed to do during our lifetime, considering our moral maturing and our relationship with God and our neighbors: “… will the person I am really sorrowfully salute from afar and for all eternity the one I might have become?”

If eternity is not an endless continuation of time but the finality and definitiveness of what a human person has chosen to be in time, then the time of a person would not yet be finished as long as there are unused possibilities of freedom still available for a human being. If eternity is not an endless sequence of time, but rather the mature fruit of time, then the time of a free human person would not have become eternity as long as the person has not yet realized the

13) Ibid., 180.
14) Ibid.
authentic Love of God and neighbors. For this reason Rahner postulates a ‘fulfilled fulfillment’ (“vollendete Vollendung”): God will lead everyone in such a way that a person can find his complete perfection. A ‘fulfilled fulfillment’ – a complete perfection – means that, a human being in the eschatological fulfillment would be able, to realize as a free subject his love towards God and his neighbors which can give his life a completeness and definitive personal identity. This realization of a complete perfection can be connected according to Rahner with the traditional catholic doctrine of purgatory.

2.2. Purgatory as integration of the whole person into the fundamental option for God

Rahner maintains that purgatory cannot be reduced to a “payment of debt of punishment due to sin”. The traditional point of view that purgatory does not improve the human being is not correct. The doctrine of purgatory allows us to think about a ‘development’ and an improvement of human beings after – or more precisely – in or with death. According to Rahner, the catholic doctrine of purgatory not only maintains that death brings about a definitively free and matured attitude towards God. Catholic doctrine also maintains that the many dimensions of the person do not attain their perfection simultaneously, but that there is a full ripening of the individual after death which penetrates his whole personality and his whole freedom. In Rahner’s conception, which he develops especially in his studies on indulgence, purgatory can be conceived “as integration of all the manifold dimensions of man into the basic decision of man”.

16) Ibid.
For Rahner the decisions a human being takes from his innermost ‘kernel’ – the innermost center – of his personal freedom, take shape in dimensions of his being which are not simply identical with the center of personhood. The person acquires attitudes and habits. A person gives his character a distinctive form and objectifies through the acts in which he exercises his freedom, by imposing them into his environment. Because of the manifold and multileveled structure of a human person, when a person turns back to God in the act of conversion, this act of conversion does not simply undo or break up all the ingrained attitudes, all the encrustations and the after-effects of our former decisions. A transformation of the whole human being, in all his manifold aspects, therefore must be seen as a process of healing and reconciliation. This process of integrating and of transforming all aspects of our lives and all our free choices into a basic orientation towards God can be understood in traditional terms as the temporal punishment due to sin. Hence, the temporal punishment due to sin in Rahner’s conception is not an extrinsic punishment imposed by God but rather the intrinsic consequence of sin itself. This very process of overcoming the intrinsic consequences of sin does not simply end with the death of the individual person. It can be thought of as an ongoing process of healing and reconciliation with God after death, which the catholic doctrine calls purgatory. Purgatory can be seen as a “maturing process of the person, through which, though gradually, all the powers of the human being become slowly integrated into the basic decision of the free person”.19) This process of maturing and integration of all powers requires the contribution of the free person and of human freedom itself. It is the human being as a free subject that has to mature. The subject can facilitate or hinder this process of maturing. The concept of purgatory requires that the dead are capable of a truly personal and conscious life.

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In his later publications Rahner becomes more skeptical towards the traditional doctrine of the inter-mediate state and understands the process of personal-maturing — purgatory — as a theological aspect of death. Nevertheless in his only extended article on purgatory he asks, if the doctrine of purgatory puts a “peculiar reservation” into the eschatological concept that with death and the particular judgment a person’s history comes to its definitive completion. This small intermediate state between the definitiveness of the human being’s history and his complete perfection opens up the possibility of a post-mortal ‘history’ of freedom. Moreover the doctrine of purgatory could be connected with the religious traditions of mankind — and also the doctrine of reincarnation — which maintains that there is for the dead a further development and an enduring relationship to their former personal and physical world. Rahner underlines that every human being has to reckon in his earthly existence with the possibility of a free acceptance or free rejection of God. But he also asks: What happens to those persons who never reached finality and a definitiveness of life as a result of self-enactment of freedom? Rahner mentions in this context the destiny of all the infants who died before they came to a proper and free decision for God and raises the theological problem of limbo — the limbus puerorum — the destiny of the children who died without baptism. If purgatory is not something which exists on behalf of a formal

21) In this article on purgatory we find not a kind of straightforward investigation on purgatory. Rahner represents his ideas in the form of dialogue between two theologians on the subject of purgatory. Where the first theologian represents Rahners more securely established ideas the second theologian represents more an exploration of new theories on purgatory. In the following I would like to focus more on these new ideas. K. Rahner, “Fegfeuer”, in Schriften zur Theologie, Bd. XIV, (Zürich, 1980), 435-449, here: 444.
22) K. Rahners asks if the catholic doctrine of purgatory leaves space for a modified (and tempered) doctrine of reincarnation. From the catholic doctrine of purgatory one might ask if the doctrine or reincarnation which spread throughout human history contains a certain truth. See: K. Rahner, “Fegfeuer”, 447-448.
23) K. Rahner, “Fegfeuer”, 446.
and external divine decree but rather exists as a connatural consequence of the manifold structure of human existence, then Rahner concludes: “I could imagine that it might offer opportunities and scope for a post-mortal history of freedom (post-mortale Freiheitsgeschichte) to someone who had been denied such a history in his earthly life.”24)

It is Rahner’s conviction that salvation occurs in a historical and dialogical situation between God’s self-communication and the human being’s free acceptance of God’s Grace. This leads to the conclusion that eschatological fulfillment and the perfection of the person can be realized only through an enactment of human freedom. The opportunity for such an enactment of freedom in a post-mortal history is opened by purgatory.25) Does the doctrine of purgatory also open the possibility for a post-mortal conversion, a radical change of the fundamental attitude of a person towards God? I would like to discuss this question in the following point.

2.3. Purgatory and the possibility of an eschatological conversion

It is evident that Rahner correlates the doctrine of purgatory with the concept of reincarnation only “insofar he is admitting the coherence of a personal development (and thus of decision for God) after death.”26) One of the major questions Rahner’s

24) Ibid., 447.
26) M. Ludlow, Universal Salvation, 204. Rahner himself stresses the unity of the human person as body and soul, the uniqueness of human history and the priority of grace in the salvation of man in such a way that a mediation of the Christian eschatological belief and the doctrine of reincarnation seems to be difficult. See: Fritsch, Vollendete Selbstmitteilung, 478–479, who delivers many examples for Rahners critical thoughts on the concept of reincarnations. See also Klaus Vechtel, “Seelenwanderung oder Auferstehung? Christliche Auferstehungshoffnung angesichts westlicher Reinkarnationsvorstellungen”, in: GuL, 74 (2001), 106-119; Medard Kehl, Und was kommt nach dem Ende? von Weltuntergang und Vollendung, Wiedergeburt und Auferstehung, (Freiburg, 1999), 46-71.
theory on purgatory raises is to whom exactly the possibility of freedom and choice will be given. For Morwenna Ludlow it is difficult to see why the opportunity of post-mortal decisions “should be a possibility for some people and not for others”.27) Why should God not provide the possibility to change their decisions for those who previously rejected God?28) The American Theologian Jerry Walls develops with reference to Rahner a concept of purgatory as a ‘second chance theory’: Walls maintains that the traditional doctrine of purgatory should be “modified to include the opportunity for post-mortem repentance and conversion”.29) According to Walls God would provide the possibility of a post-mortem conversion for those who did not come to a conversion during their life-time.30)

For Rahner a ‘second chance theory’ of purgatory undermines the uniqueness of the human history of freedom and the definitiveness of human freedom in death. A radical change of the fundamental attitude of the human subject towards God in a post-mortal history remains unthinkable. Even though Rahner denies the possibility of a post-mortal conversion he maintains (like von Balthasar) a universal hope for salvation, based on the consummated redemption in Christ and the grace offered in God’s self-communication to all human beings.31) This universal hope is supported by Rahner’s metaphysical and personal conception of freedom. The rejection of God

27) M. Ludlow, _Universal Salvation_, 205.
28) See: M. Ludlow, _Universal Salvation_, 204-205.
30) God gives to all persons what Walls calls ‘optimal grace’. God knows how to elicit a positive response from each person without overriding their freedom. This optimal grace given by God includes according to Walls also the opportunity of post-mortem decision and a post-mortem conversion See: Walls, _Purgatory_, 123-129, 140-141, 150-152.
31) “Christian eschatology is not the parallel prolongation of a ‘doctrine of two ways’ [...] to reach the two termini of these two ways. Its central affirmation is concerned only with the victorious grace of Christ which brings the world to its fulfillment, though couched indeed in terms which safeguard God’s mystery with regard to individual men as still pilgrims and do not say whether the individual is included in this certain triumph of grace – or ‘left out’. Hence on principle only one predestination will be spoken of in a Christian eschatology, and it contains only one theme which is there on its own behalf: the victory of grace on redemption consummated” K. Rahner, _Theologische Prinzipien_, 340.
cannot be considered as a possibility what is of ontological equality with the acceptance of God.\footnote{Hell must be understood as the ultimate and definitive failure of the person's to attain their fulfillment in God. Hell is not an extrinsic punishment by a cruel and unmerciful God but the consequence of human rejection of God and hence the ultimate possibility of human freedom. See: K. Rahner, “Art. Hölle”, in \textit{Sämtliche Werke}, Bd.17 (= SW 17), \textit{Enzyklopädische Theologie. Die Lexikombeiträge der Jahre 1956–1973}, (Freiburg u.a., 2002), 1088–1091; “Hinüberwandern zur Hoffnung”, in \textit{Sämtliche Werke}, Bd.30: \textit{Anstoß; systematischer Theologie, Beiträge zur Fundamentaltheologie und Dogmatik}, (Freiburg, 2009), 668–673.} The rejection of God is based on a self-contradiction of human freedom, which in the very act of rejection necessarily affirms God as the last ground of freedom. This self-contradiction of human freedom in the rejection of God renders possible the hope that the rejection of God was not complete, and there remains still an openness of the person towards God, which can be relevant for salvation in the ultimate encounter with God.

With Rahner it would maintain the relevance of the personal history of freedom which becomes definitive in death. I would like to distinguish between the definitiveness of the human person in death and the fulfillment, the complete perfection of the human person. The transition of the definitiveness of a human life into the fulfillment and complete perfection, which lies beyond empirical time, can be seen as an opportunity of human freedom to take a position towards God and towards one’s own history of life. I surely cannot undo the history of my life and of my personal choices, but I can see them with other eyes, with the eyes of God’s mercy and love. The question of a post-mortal conversion becomes even more urgent in Hans Urs von Balthasars eschatology, which I want to discuss in the following point.

3. Balthasar’s theodramatic eschatology and the question of freedom

3.1. The judgment as dramatic encounter of human and divine freedom

Human freedom according to von Balthasar has to be understood as self-possession and subjectivity, similar to Rahners conception of freedom.\footnote{Hell must be understood as the ultimate and definitive failure of the person's to attain their fulfillment in God. Hell is not an extrinsic punishment by a cruel and unmerciful God but the consequence of human rejection of God and hence the ultimate possibility of human freedom. See: K. Rahner, “Art. Hölle”, in \textit{Sämtliche Werke}, Bd.17 (= SW 17), \textit{Enzyklopädische Theologie. Die Lexikombeiträge der Jahre 1956–1973}, (Freiburg u.a., 2002), 1088–1091; “Hinüberwandern zur Hoffnung”, in \textit{Sämtliche Werke}, Bd.30: \textit{Anstoß; systematischer Theologie, Beiträge zur Fundamentaltheologie und Dogmatik}, (Freiburg, 2009), 668–673.} More
accentuated as in Rahner’s theology of freedom von Balthasar underlines the personal and dialogical mediation of human freedom. Freedom is realized through dialogue with another person. Paradigmatic is von Balthasar’s phenomenological analysis of the relationship between mother and child: The subjectivity and freedom of the child arise through the love of the mother. Responding to the loving ‘Thou’ of the mother, the ‘I’ – or respectively the subject – takes possession of itself, arises to self-possession, self-identity and freedom. This primal, loving encounter with the ‘Thou’ can be seen as a disclosure of an infinite horizon of being as such, a disclosure which opens the whole reality of being including the divine reality: “There is no encounter […] which could add anything to the encounter with the first-comprehended smile of the mother. […] The first experience contains the unsurpassable, id quo majus cogitari non potest”.

It is the experience – according to von Balthasar – that love is the core of all being. Similar to Rahner’s transcendental experience, von Balthasar’s theology also is determined by a transcendental, primal experience of being which becomes relevant for the foundation of Christian faith.

Human freedom according to von Balthasar is realized in dialogue with another person and with a reality, it is realized in a mutual relationship of acceptance between the ‘I’ and the ‘Thou’. It follows that freedom necessarily has to choose whether to accept the other, the ‘Thou’, or to abuse the other as a means for one’s

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37) This correspondence between Rahner and von Balthasar is emphasized by: Thomas Möllenbeck, “Endliche Freiheit, unendlich zu sein. Zum metaphysischen Anknüpfungspunkt der Theologie mit Rahner, von Balthasar und Duns Scotus”, *PaThSt Bd.53*, (Paderborn u.a., 2012), 185-208.
own purpose. Human freedom is called to an ultimate indifference in which the person accepts his or her own finitude and creatureliness in relation to God and the other human beings. With this conception of human freedom we touch a decisive point in von Balthasar’s theology. The center of his theology is the ‘theo-drama’: God’s revelation must be understood in an action which includes the human action; God’s revelation must be understood as a dramatic encounter of divine and human freedom. This concept is highly significant for von Balthasar’s eschatology and especially for his doctrine of a divine judgment.

The divine judgment according to Balthasar is the decisive aspect of the caesura into which every human being enters at the moment of death. No one will be saved (or gain salvation) without passing through God’s judgment (1Cor 3,13). Judgment completes what has begun in death: there is the caesura or a hiatus between the earthly life and its goal – a fulfillment in God – “for the individual, it is death; for history the end-times; for both, the purifying and decisive judgment.” von Balthasar wants to overcome the traditional separation of the individual judgment after death and the universal judgment at the end of times: According to the Bible there is only one

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judgment, in which the destiny of the individual person and the destiny of all human beings are in a dynamical way connected with each other.

Balthasar sees the divine judgment as an inter-subjective event of divine and human freedom which underlines – more accentuated than in Rahner’s conception – the character of the eschatological fulfillment as a personal and dialogical encounter. As we have already seen: The free self-possession of the person is realized and mediated through encounter with the other person. Freedom as a loving acceptance and recognition of the other in the context of judgment means: The person has the opportunity to recognize and to accept the truth of his/her own existence in the definitive encounter with God in Christ, to whom the Father has given the authority of judgment. Christ according to von Balthasar is the “judged judge”42) (der gerichtete Richter), the one who experienced in his death at the cross the inner consequences of sin and of the sinner’s rejection of God.

Christ, the judged judge, knows our miserable and sinful identity in a personal way and thus he is able to restore the broken relationship between the sinner and God. In the definitive encounter with Christ the sinner has the possibility of recognizing the sinful truth of his existence, but at the same time he has the opportunity to recognize his own true identity in Christ who is the new Adam. The person can realize in Christ the true image of God and has the opportunity to identify with his true identity represented in Christ. The Sinner recognizes himself in Christ, “the lamb without blemish and without spot” (1Pet 1,19), as the one he is in the eyes of God and should become in God’s salvific plan. This conception of the judgment, intended as an event of mutual personal acceptance between the sinner and Christ, includes a moment of free decision. The insight and recognition of truth, offered to all sinners by Christ, contains the choice to open to a process of repentance and of purification. Purgatory therefore has to be understood as an inner aspect of the judgment. In a short but instructive article on judgment von Balthasar maintains: Before the vision

given to the sinner in Christ, a vision that shatters all human arrogance, it comes to a
last decision: Or the sinner gives himself away into flames of God’s love, who shall
purify him and make the person God wants him to be, or he will hate this image
offered him by Christ and remain encapsulated in his ego in a timelesslessness, that will
be as long, as the sinners will not to surrender to God’s love.43)

Does von Balthasar’s conception of the judgment, intended as dramatic encounter
of human and divine freedom, disclose the possibility of an eschatological
conversion, a radical fundamental attitude of the human towards God? Is there a
significant difference between Rahner’s and von Balthasar’s eschatological point of
view? I want discuss this questions looking at von Balthasar’s highly significant
contribution to the question of a universal hope for the salvation of all human
beings, which he delivers in his interpretation of Christ’s descent into hell.

3.2. Christ’s descent into hell

The most crucial question in the dramatic encounter of human and divine
freedom according to von Balthasar is: How can human freedom realize itself all
the way to a rejection of God’s love and mercy? How can God respect human
choice and still be able to save human beings by receiving them into his triune
life?44) The answer to this question lies in the article of the creed that proclaims
Christ’s descent to the dead or Christ’s descent into hell.45) The realm of death – in

niederschmetternden Schau entscheidet sich das Letzte. Entweder stürzt er sich freiwillig und
dankbar in die Flammen Gottes, die ihn zu dem läutern sollen, was er werden möchte, aber noch
nicht ist, gleichgültig, wie weh es tun und wie lange es dauern wird – oder er hasst dieses Bild
seiner selbst in Gott, er will nicht “sich selbst entfremdet” in Gott, sondern bei sich selber er
selber sein, und dann kann die Flamme Gottes ihn erfassen, in einer Zeitlosigkeit, die ebenso
dauert wie sein Wille, sich zu bewahren und nicht zu kapitulieren.”
44) See: von Balthasar, Theodramatik, Bd. IV, 47-49, 171-173; Werner Löser, Im Geiste des Origenes.
Mysterium Salutis. Grundriss heilsgeschichtlicher Dogmatik, Bd. III/2, (Einsiedeln, 1969), 133-326;
“Abstieg zur Hölle”, in Pneuma und Institution, Skizzen zur Theologie, Bd. IV, (Einsiedeln,
terms of the Old Testament: the scheol – can be considered as a state of separation from God, a state of being completely forsaken by God, in which the dead cannot praise God anymore. This realm of death according to von Balthasar can be identified with hell, precisely because the essence of hell is separation from God, the loss of all relationships, a complete loneliness, in which the sinner chooses his ego rather than live-giving relationship with God.

In addition to the crucifixion on Good Friday, von Balthasar understands the mystery of Holy Saturday in which Christ descended into hell as the final act of his self-emptying (kenosis) in a total and final solidarity with all sinners, in a total self-enstrangement from the Father: “In sheol, in the Pit, all that reigns is the darkness of perfect loneliness. [...] if Jesus has suffered through on the cross the sin of the world to the very last truth of sin (to be forsaken by God), then he must experience, in solidarity with the sinners who have gone to the underworld, their (ultimate hopeless) separation from God”.

von Balthasar maintains that this last solidarity of Christ with the sinners and the damned in his descent to hell does not override human freedom and the choice in which the sinner has chosen his last loneliness. In contrast to his passion and his death on the cross Christ does not play an active role in his descent to hell. Furthermore, in contrast to the tradition of the eastern churches von Balthasar considers Christ’s descent to hell not as a triumphant conquest of hell, but strictly as a passive Being-with-the-Dead. In an ultimate expression of love Christ is dead with the dead and thus he is disturbing the

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loneliness the sinner has chosen. In this way, Balthasar maintains, the “freedom of the creature is respected but, at the end of the passion, it is overtaken (eingeholt) and grasped from below (untergriffen).” 47) The sinner’s attempt to realize an absolute loneliness or a so to speak “counter-absoluteness” 48) (Gegenabsolutheit) against God has failed. In the absolute loneliness and weakness of the Son, in his abandonment by the father, God offers human freedom his infinite and absolute love.

The descent of Christ into hell establishes the Christian hope of salvation for all human beings. 49) von Balthasar does not intend to teach apokatastasis as doctrine. 50) Against the harsh criticism that his theology of the Holy Saturday would maintain a apokatastasis – von Balthasar speaks of his critics as ‘infernalists’ – he defends the Christian obligation to hope for the salvation of all human beings which has to be distinguished from any kind of knowledge or theological ‘system’ of apocatastasis-doctrine. 51) Why does the theology of Holy Saturday not lead to the doctrine of apokatastasis? von Balthasar believes: “We will not be saved against our will.” 52) It is my opinion that Christ’s descent into hell does not lead to the conclusion that all human beings will be saved only if it is put into the context of an eschatological relevance of human freedom: If it is true that salvation occurs in the

50) See: Robert Nandkisore, Hoffnung auf Erlösung, 267-268; Daniela Engelhard, Im Angesicht, 220-222; Sebastian Greiner, Für alle hoffen, 242.
52) von Balthasar, Theodramatik, Bd. IV, 261.
context of the person’s free will, then Christ’s descent into hell has to be intended as the ultimate eschatological offer of God’s grace. God would maintain his universal salvific will and the offer of his grace even at the ‘place’ of abandonment from God, at the ‘place’ of forsakeness from God. If the belief that the already has an openness and capability to accept this offer, is something that goes beyond human knowledge it still remains an object of hope. Thus, von Balthasar’s theology of the Holy Saturday includes a concept of vicarious representation that does not overrule human freedom. Christ descent into hell enables the sinner to realize his own salvation.

3.3. Open questions

Nevertheless, there are still open questions in this view of Christ’s descent into hell, concerning human freedom and the definitiveness of human history in death. Balthasar writes for example: “God gives man the capacity to make a negative choice against God that seems for man to be definitive, but which need not be taken by God as definitive.” How can human being’s not be taken as definitive by God without overwhelming human freedom? Wouldn’t this undermine the definitiveness of human freedom in death, that was emphasized by Rahner? In a recent major study, Alyssa Pitstick, maintains that the theology of the descent of Christ expresses the possibility of an eschatological conversion – a kind of second chance for the sinner. According to Pitstick von Balthasar emphasizes the passivity of the human being in the process of redemption in such a way, that Christ’s descent into hell must lead to an apocatastasis.

First: Several passages in von Balthasar’s works incline towards a limitation of the relevance of subject, its freedom and autonomy. In his eschatological writings he refers to Adrienne von Speyr and her visions of a ‘decomposition’ or ‘destruction’ of the ‘I’

54) See: Pitstick, Light in Darkness, 266-268.
in the process of purification (purgatory).

55) Is there any correspondence between such expressions and the conception of judgment as a free acceptance of Christ? Balthasar try to emphasize the redeeming work of God in his revelation and to stress the passive role of the subject in the very process of salvation, especially when he refers to the stauro-centric mystic of Adrienne von Speyr. This one-sided emphasis can lead to misunderstandings. Therefore it seems to me important to distinguish very clearly between the weakness and soteriological powerlessness of the sinner on the one hand and the role of the human being as subject and person in the dialogical mediation of salvation on the other hand, which cannot be overruled, even in his weakness as sinner.

56) Second: It is my opinion that the theology of Holy Saturday does not diminish the definitiveness of human life and human history in death. According to von Balthasar the negative decision of a person towards God depends, in the very act of rejecting him on a self-contradiction of what it means to be human, just as it is the case in Rahner’s theology of human freedom.

57) There is only one aim for the human being as God’s creature: to share in God’s triune life as it’s eternal fulfillment. Thus an ultimate choice in which the sinner decides to live on his own remains a contradictory act of his freedom. This self-contradictory act of human freedom is, in von Balthasar’s conception of Christ’s descent into hell, the reason for hope, hope that the choice of an ultimate loneliness and the rejection God on behalf of the sinner did not have a definitive character (even if it seems to be

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definitive choice). In the fourth volume of his Theodramatic von Balthasar uses a metaphorical expression for his point of view: “The shell [of the sinners self-closure against God] is not hard enough, because it is made of a contradiction; maybe someone, who’s shell can still break open, is not already in hell but only in defiance (obstinacy) against God, turned towards hell”. 58) In von Balthasar’s conception, the sinner’s decision against God has got an inchoative character and did not penetrate his whole life and his very essence of being God’s creature. This renders possible the hope that even the sinner with his rejection of God is still capable of accepting God’s eschatological offer of grace in Christ’s descent into hell.

The hope of an eschatological salvation of all human beings does not represent a kind of postmodern ‘second-chance’ or ‘anything-goes-theory’: It presupposes that the human being through the history of his free choices is still capable of accepting God’s offer of grace. So I would argue that even von Balthasar’s theology of Christ’s descent into hell corresponds to the definitiveness of human freedom emphasized by Rahner.

4. Concluding reflections

Both, Rahner and von Balthasar, did make a remarkable contribution to contemporary eschatology: they overcome the limitations of the neo-scholastic doctrine of the ‘last things’ by understanding the eschatological fulfillment as definitive encounter with God which can be interpreted in personal and dialogical categories. Against the traditional separation of the individual and universal judgment, both underline the connection and unity between individual and eschatological fulfillment. Against a neo-scholastic vision of death as separation of body and soul both emphasize the unity of the human being as body and soul and the death as a definitive end of human existence. A

58) von Balthasar, Theodramatik, Bd. IV, 286.
Christian eschatology based on personal categories raises the question about the role of the human in the eschatological fulfillment. If there is no human freedom divine judgment and the purification of a person make no sense, if they are perceived as distinct aspects of a personal encounter with God. A truly personal encounter cannot be seen as something that reduces the person to absolute passivity and powerlessness.

- With Rahner I would underline the definitiveness of the person’s history in death - against ‘second-chance-theories’ or attempts to mediate Christian eschatology with the doctrine of reincarnation. The definitiveness reached in death (just as Rahner maintains) cannot be seen as something in a rather arbitrary temporal moment of dying. Definitiveness of human existence requires also the aspect of reflection and of acceptance on behalf of the person. The person has to recognize the truth of its own existence and must have the freedom to accept this truth in painful and remorseful process or to reject the truth of its own existence. More than Rahner does in his theology of death I would like to distinguish between the definitiveness of the human person in death and the fulfillment, the complete perfection of the human person. My thesis is: It is the transition of definitiveness of the human existence into fulfillment and complete perfection - a transition which lies beyond empirical time - that can be seen as the possibility of the human person taking a position towards God and towards one’s own life history. This does not mean that I can undo choices and things I did in my lifetime, but I can adopt God’s view at my life, his justice and mercy.

- With von Balthasar I would like to underline - more explicit by Rahner - the dialogical character in the eschatological fulfillment of the human being in the divine judgment. According to Ratzinger the judgment can be conceived as the revealing of truth in the encounter of the person with Christ. Thus the truth of human existence is not simply a neutral fact but rather a personal Christ. This
personal truth came to save all human beings. Ratzinger concludes that the truth of the human does not become definitive by the simple fact of death as a natural event. The truth of the person becomes definitive in the judgment, in the acceptance of the revealed truth of life mediated through personal encounter with Christ.\(^{59}\) Therefore I would understand the divine judgment with reference to Medard Kehl as the eschatological event in which the search for identity of the human being becomes definitive in a way that allows the person to bring to completeness all the different and fragmentary aspects of his/her existence in the healing and loving presence of God.\(^{60}\) A dialogical and personal view of the divine is open to conceive the judgment as an inter-subjective event, where there is even hope for reconciliation between the perpetrators and their victims.\(^{61}\) The hope of salvation for all human beings can be founded, I maintain with Rahner and von Balthasar, in the fact that the person has only one goal: fulfillment in communion with the triune God of love. If the rejection of God remains a self-contradictory act of human freedom, then we can dare to hope, that there remains in the sinner an openness towards God that allows him to accept the revealed truth of his life in a process of repentance and reconciliation.


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자유와 종말론:
종말론적 충만함에 있어서 자유의 문제에 대한
칼 라너와 한스 우르스 폰 발타사르의 공헌

클라우스 페히틀 S.J.

지난 50년 동안 가톨릭의 종말론에 있어 괄목할만한 변화가 일어났다. 종말론의 “자리들” 최후의 심판, 연옥, 천국과 지옥에 대한 전통적 가르침들은 개별 인간 및 전체인류의 하느님과의 결정적 만남, 그리고 시간적으로 구분되는 만남으로서가 아니라, 절적으로 그리고 인격적 관계라는 카테고리의 용어로 이해되었다. 인격적 카테고리에 기초한 이러한 해석학적 든은 결과적으로 현대의 신학으로 하여금 종말론적 충만함에 있어서 인간 자유의 역할에 대해 질문하게 한다. 인간의 자유는 하느님과의 궁극적 그리고 결정적 만남에서 인간 구원을 위해 여전히 중요한 어떤 결정들을 할 수 있는 것인가? 칼 라너와 한스 우르스 폰 발타사르는 지난 세기 가톨릭 신학의 쇠퇴에 있어서 가장 중요한 신학자들 중의 하나이다. 라너와 폰 발타사르 둘 다 모든 이를 위한 보편 구원에 대한 화망을 강조한다. 본 논문에서는 종말론에 있어 그리고 특별히 종말론적 충만함에 있어서 인간 자유의 역할을 검토하였다.

주제어: 종말론, 인격적 카테고리, 자유, 하느님과의 결정적 만남, 보편적 화망

Freedom and Eschatology 113
In the catholic eschatology of the last fifty years a remarkable change has taken place. The traditional doctrine of the eschatological “places” - final judgment, purgatory, heaven and hell - has to be understood in terms and categories of a personal relationship and qualitatively not as temporally distinct moments of the definitive encounter of the single person and the entire mankind with God. As a consequence of this hermeneutical framework based on personal categories contemporary theology is confronted with the question about the role of human freedom in the eschatological fulfillment. Is human freedom capable of decisions which are still relevant for human salvation in the final and definitive encounter with God? Karl Rahner and Hans Urs von Balthasar are among the most important theologians in the renewal of catholic theology in the last century. Both, Rahner and von Balthasar, are stressing the hope for a universal salvation of all. Their contribution to eschatology and especially to the role of human freedom in the eschatological fulfillment will be examined.

Key Words: Eschatology, Personal categories, Freedom, Definitive encounter with God, Universal hope