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Constraints on the Theological Absorption of Plurality

Catherine Bell

I am pleased to be invited to join a conversation in which I am so poorly schooled, although I fear the impression of disrespect in the face of a body of work that clearly has had so much impact and continuing potential, as suggested by my colleagues here today. I was given a fairly sound if basic theological education, but it ended too many years ago with a great deal of Tillich and bits of Lonergan. At this point in my career, I come to Rahner with the issues of someone who has tried, in a small way, to understand a very different set of cosmologies and conceptions of the human—those of Asia, and particularly Chinese at various points in its history, but also those nurtured in Judaism and Islam. In my work on ritual I have also struggled to deal with the difficulties of a Euro-American tradition of inquiry brought to bear on ways of being that have at times no easy correspondence to my terms, and certainly no need of my inquiry.

I am very much intrigued to hear any reassessment of where theology is left after the series of cultural waves that have washed over it—the modern intellectual developments in which we have participated. I refer not only to the wave of postmodernism, building up since the early decades of the last century, but also the self-scrutiny of postcolonial studies, and the waves of gender and gay studies with their concomitant social changes. We know that too often they have left a defensive traditionalism in Rome, but they have not been without their influence even there. Yet in theology overall, their impact has been surprisingly spotty, not nearly as dramatic as I would have expected it to be.

Most of us here have lived through the second half of the twentieth century with few of the assumptions current at the time of Rahner's birth, but we may still have inherited much of the training put in place by those older views. We have had to find our way when deciding what to hold on to and what to reach out for, risking an awkward grasp and even an embarrassing miss. It has been a time in which we may have thought we were moving into radically different theological waters, but deeply rooted assumptions have still exerted a powerful structuring effect. We had training in theology even as our thinking about it had to attempt to keep up with a world that set about inverting its assumptions. So we might reach for "first principles" and then sit back, realizing, "Oh, right. It is not like that anymore." Theology, as a motivating and legitimating cultural ideology, has been implicated in all the subtle dynamics of colonization and cultural political hegemony. Even continuing the critique, missionary activity, once vilified, has gone on to be reevaluated: if it gave people choices, if it opened up multicultural areas with new freedoms and opportunities for cross-cultural interaction, then it could not be so bad. Yet rarely did the choices come at no cost. Still, with its catechisms, primers, buildings, art, and, in some places, science, did theology not undergird the many forms of self-justification and willful ignorance behind colonial control, denigration, and even annihilation of other cultures in the first place? While theology itself did not rush in to do these things, was it not the ground for the perpetrators' understanding of the role of God in human history, ecclesial institutions, material wealth, and military power?

Assuming we are not free of the deep-rooted tendencies theology has acquired in the last few hundred years, I would be wary of a Rahnerian program or any theological program that puts dialogue with other religions on a stronger Christian footing. It is suggested that Rahner's anthropological turn gave him access to, if not the mystery of God, the mystery of human nature. Well, confidence that one knows human nature can be another form of arrogance and blindness; and through the power inherent within Euro-American discourse, it could easily become coercive in unexpected ways.

That said, the ideas presented here do encourage and hearten. To hear from Professor Sheehan that a radically historical Christology puts responsibility for the kingdom of God very much on the shoulders of those who have flown its banner and thanked God for his work among us—that understanding brings a sense of relief—and some excitement, for such an appreciation of historicity suggests the prospect of liberation from some of the assumptions that bind us to such a difficult historical past. To hear from Professor Clooney about a theology in which God is clearly working in the very particularity of other religions is to confuse all the theological premises we have not known we still had. He makes it clear that to be confused by this is the theologian's business—and it changes everything.

I would like to say more about these points as best I can. A theology of the human person might still replicate many of the problems Christianity has had in relationship to other religions. It will still have trouble addressing the cultural contexts and institutional pressures that shape all the theologizing we do, and how to overcome such an obstacle. Yes, we should pursue this well-argued and long-overdue theological paradigm shift, facing its problems as we go. But there is no clarity at this point as to how this new human-centered paradigm will escape the pressures to provide a rationale for a new attempt at hegemony in the battle of ideologies of "truth."

Professor Clooney's insistence on the religious particulars that Rahner's theology would appreciate and protect means, he argues, that the easy stereotypes could be kept from circulating. Yet, that battle is lost in America and most of Europe. Perhaps all that can be done is the inculcation of respect for a holism, no matter how partially understood, and a responsibility to use the terms of another religion with the expectation that one does not really know what they mean and should at least go to see for oneself. After all, amid the pluralism of large American cities, usually it is not far to go. At the same time, America illustrates how much religious cultures are not little islands with clear boundaries. The boundaries are cultures themselves. The Christianity of Boston's Irish Catholics demonstrates a very layered and dif-fused way of being Christian. We find in the history of religions so many problems with the notion of culture, mostly because we quietly press it into service in so many tight spots.

It is even harder for me to understand how to define the religious particulars for engagement; the holisms I suggested above are hardly any better. Would we simply have to be more explicit? Whatever appears to challenge your faith should be engaged so that you understand it better in its own terms and that will result in . . . what? We do not really know how to end this sentence.

Still, we do know that such engagements are actually happening all the time: The anthropology student on campus who, a strict Pentecostal Catholic, forces herself to take courses in tribal religions and eventually identifies herself as both Buddhist and Catholic (real story). The Iranian Muslim boy who wanted to be a real American and so joined a Baptist community where he learned, for years, the premises and style of American culture; arriving at college he is told to take courses in Islam and finds himself in a new mixed identity that does not easily fit anywhere (real story). Actual practice and experience is perhaps a type of guide for theology; maybe theology should not try to lead, but to follow, explaining us to ourselves.

Couldn't Rahner be used as the basis for Christianity trying to understand its particular humanity, not *anthropos* in some general and ultimate way, but Christianity's own way of being in the world, which means of course its many ways of being Christian? If a Christian theologian understands that a

grasp of her own way of being and being Christian can't be separated, then she might see that an anthropological turn cannot approach human experience as single and accessible. The new Christian theologian cannot be new if *he claims to understand other ways of being*. Theology must recognize difference, real difference, which is a matter of opening all the doors, not knowing all the answers. This sort of recognition could become a powerful tool of respect and peace, but it goes against all the assumptions of our training in theological philosophizing.

I empathize with many of the views expressed here today, but I would use a different language. I would want a theological language that, recognizing particularity and holisms as they (provisionally) exist, recognizing the human and the historical, also recognizes real differences among religious cultures as well as the contradictions that exist in trying to pin such cultures down—as well as the contradictions of wanting to know the human through God or lots of particular human beings. Spending time in another religious culture is not automatic permission or expertise for describing Hindu or Chinese ways of being in the world; there cannot be a test or degree that allows anyone to hold forth, lacking which no one can. If we appreciate real difference, then there is no way to draw such lines or establish such expertise. The same is true for our grasp of the human.

Today there is no culture that does not have large sections of people who simultaneously live in more than one cultural milieu, yet theological dialogue cannot depend on some level of mastery of religious differences, although appreciation would be helpful. There is no culture that does not feel that its categories best grasp the nature of the human and the divine. Recognition of the human person can become a theological albatross, a dead end, if it is taken as too accessible or too inaccessible. Rahner should not be used to provide a new hegemony, this one from worldly reality on up to the divine. Rather, his interpreters should be guided to address and appreciate our inevitable contradictions.

What can Christianity want in the world today where it does not recognize its own legacies, where there are many different and similar ways of being religious, even being Christian, all readily accorded a place on the same shelf, "religion"? Does it want to missionize? Does it simply want to survive—and perhaps to grow and learn? Is it yearning to be master, or is it content to be disciple?

Finally, I face the reality that the theological agendas that can sound so bold may at best be playacting. Can they lead if what needs to change are the religious institutions that house us, pay us, and muffle us? Doesn't theology get pressed into their shape, hardened for their purposes? How often have the theologians in this room been influential in the public statements of their home institutions?

I hope the Rahner scholars in the room can do a better job than I have of

articulating how his ideas might be a force for convincing the world what it means to be Catholic in a world—mystery of mysteries—in which so much human experience can be so independent of Christianity, a world in which Catholicism didn't win, and probably won't win in the way once imagined. Pluralism is now the air we breathe. It is not enough for one member to identify the common human experience under it all. I keep returning to a far more radical or subversive stance: persons with a mystery to nurse or a contradiction to unravel had best conduct themselves with great humility and vulnerable openness to others. But I do not think that it is impossible, or even unfamiliar, how to make such *humility of understanding* the heart of a theological purpose.