

# Karl Rahner's Concept of the 'Anonymous Christian' An Inclusivist View of Religions

Rev Norman Wong Cheong Sau

## Preamble

Although references in this paper are taken from a number of different volumes of Karl Rahner's *Theological Investigations* which cover quite a wide time frame, his views remain consistent throughout. The sections quoted from are as follows:

Volume 6 – 1966

- Reflections on Dialogue within a Pluralistic Society
- Reflections on the Unity of the Love of Neighbour and the Love of God
- Anonymous Christians

Volume 10 – 1973

- Church, Churches and Religions

Volume 12 – 1974

- Anonymous Christianity and the Missionary Task of the Church

Volume 14 – 1976

- Observations on the Problem of the Anonymous Christians

Volume 16 – 1979

- Anonymous and Explicit Faith
- The One Christ and the Universality of Salvation

I have reproduced quotations from both his earlier writings and his later ones to demonstrate this consistency of thought. Wherever ***bold italic script*** occur in the quotations, the emphasis is mine. Other than that, the normal italic script is his own emphasis.

## Rahner's Definition of the 'Anonymous Christian'

I begin by reproducing Rahner's own definition of the term:

We prefer the terminology according to which that man is called an 'anonymous Christian' who on the one hand has *de facto* accepted of his freedom this gracious self-offering on God's part through faith, hope, and love, while on the other he is absolutely ***not yet a Christian*** at the social level (through baptism and

membership of the Church) or in the sense of having consciously objectified his Christianity to himself in his own mind (by explicit Christian faith resulting from having hearkened to the explicit Christian message) We might therefore put it as follows: the 'anonymous Christian' in our sense of the term is the pagan after the beginning of the Christian mission, who *lives in the state of Christ's grace* through faith, hope and love, *yet who has no explicit knowledge* of the fact that his life is orientated in grace-given salvation to Jesus Christ.<sup>1</sup>

Rahner approaches this issue from the grand viewpoint of the systematic theologian. I shall therefore attempt to summarise the main themes of his presentation before commenting on it.

### Why the Concept of Anonymous Christianity is Essential

Rahner acknowledges that there are some weaknesses with the term 'anonymous Christian'. He would gladly adopt another term if one could be found. Nevertheless, he insists that the concept is a vital one.

... the theory [of 'anonymous Christianity'] arose from two facts: first, the *possibility* of supernatural salvation and of a corresponding faith which must be *granted to non-Christians, even if they never become Christian*; and secondly, that *salvation cannot be gained without reference to God and Christ*, since it must in its origin, history and fulfilment be a theistic and Christian salvation.

One can only escape this conclusion if one adopts the pessimistic outlook common in the past and disputes the possibility of supernatural salvation for such people, thereby *consigning them to hell* or limbo, or if one grants salvation merely on the basis of human respectability without reference to God and Christ, or if, finally, one refuses to think about the Christian character in these cases, thus endangering the universality of Christ's redeeming action, which should on the contrary be firmly maintained.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations* Vol 14 translated by David Bourke (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1976), p 283.

<sup>2</sup> Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, Vol 16, translated by David Morland, (London: Darton, Longman & Todd 1979), p 218.

This is Rahner’s basic starting point (although he does also argue for their validity). For him these two points are accepted as being obvious and practically unquestionable. Firstly, God, who desires all men to be saved, cannot possibly consign all non-Christians to hell. Secondly, Jesus Christ is God’s only means of salvation. This must mean that the non-Christians who end up in heaven must have received the grace of Christ *without their realising it*. Hence the term – ‘anonymous Christian’.

From his background of depth psychology, Rahner is comfortable with the idea that a person may not always be aware of all the implications of his thoughts and actions.

Is it surprising that in certain circumstances the real situation and the basic self-understanding of a person may be grasped more clearly by someone else than by the person himself, who may in fact strongly resist the other’s interpretation? <sup>3</sup>

The following quotation is further evidence that this is Rahner’s philosophical starting point:

But can the Christian believe even for a moment that the overwhelming mass of his brothers not only those before the appearance of Christ right back to the most distance past (whose horizons are constantly extended by palaeontology) but also those of the present and of the future before us, are *unquestionably and in principle excluded* from the fulfilment of their lives and condemned to eternal meaninglessness? He must reject any suggestion, and his faith is itself in agreement with his doing so. For the scriptures tell him expressly that *God wants everyone to be saved* (1 Tm 2:4); the covenant of peace which God made with Noah after the flood has never been abrogated: on the contrary, the Son of God himself has sealed it with the incontestable authority of his *self-sacrificing love embracing all men*. <sup>4</sup>

## Vatican II Explicitly Endorses the Concept of the Anonymous Christian

Rahner openly aligns himself with mainstream Catholicism that also holds those two starting points mentioned above. He repeatedly affirms the

---

<sup>3</sup> Rahner, *Theological Investigations* Vol 16, p 219.

<sup>4</sup> Rahner, *Theological Investigations* Vol 6, p 391.

uniqueness of the revelation of Christ and the role of the Church. As such his approach firmly rejects the more relativistic approach of John Hick.<sup>5</sup>

An intrinsic element in his Christian and Catholic beliefs is the conviction of faith that now at any rate ***Christianity is the unique and absolute religion*** founded by God through Christ and prescribed by him for all men; that is *the* way of salvation which God, of his salvific will, has created for all and made radically binding for all to follow. ***We cannot adopt that attitude of religious relativism which regards all religions as on the whole equally justifiable***, and the confusion and disorder among them as relatively unimportant;<sup>6</sup>

The fact that he frequently repeats these two points in different contexts spread over several years, is further evidence that they form his basic starting point.

A further fact which he has to take into consideration is that he is ***bound by the terms of his own Catholic belief*** to hold fast to the fact that ***God truly and effectively wills all men to be saved***. He cannot hold the opinion that God himself denies the possibility and the grace of salvation to a wide section of mankind. And yet ***it is only in Jesus Christ that this salvation is conferred***, and through Christianity and the one Church that it must be mediated to all men.<sup>7</sup>

He was greatly encouraged by the statements of Vatican II, regarding them as further endorsement of his theory of the anonymous Christian.

What is meant by this thesis of the anonymous Christian is also taught materially in the Constitution on the Church of Vatican II (no.16). According to this document those who have not yet received the gospel and this *without any fault* of their own are given the possibility of eternal salvation...God 'in the unknown ways' of his grace can give the *faith* without which there is no salvation even to those who have not yet heard the preaching of the gospel...it is quite impossible to doubt that what is *meant* by

---

<sup>5</sup> See for example Hick, John. *God and the Universe of Faiths*, (The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1973).

<sup>6</sup> Rahner, *Theological Investigations* Vol 10 translated by David Bourke (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1973), p 31.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p 31.

the 'anonymous Christian' (the name itself is unimportant) is compatible with the Council's teaching, indeed is ***explicitly stated by it***...such a theory in no way cripples the missionary impulse of the Church but rather puts before it the person to whom it addresses itself in his true hopeful condition ***so that it can approach him with confidence***.<sup>8</sup>

The section from Vatican II which he referred to reads as follows:

Those also can attain to everlasting salvation who, through no fault of their own, do not know the gospel of Christ or his Church, yet sincerely seek God and, moved by grace, strive by their deeds to do his will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience.<sup>9</sup>

He is of the opinion that this statement allows even atheists and polytheists the possibility of salvation.

..the Second Vatican Council has recognised the possibility that even ***non-Christians, polytheists and atheists*** can live in a subjective state of freedom from serious sin...So the possibility cannot be denied to any other group of men, whatever their externally verifiable attitudes and beliefs.<sup>10</sup>

## The Importance of Dialogue

Working backwards from his philosophical position, Rahner (rightly) highlights the importance of dialogue in an age where the mega cities of the world have thrown together peoples of diverse cultures and religions.

For better or for worse, everyone has become everyone else's neighbour. If, therefore, one does not want to hold the absurd opinion that the existence of man can be regulated and preserved in the same living space independently of his views and opinions – in other words, that culture is not at all important for life on the biological and civilisational, social plane of human existence, - ***dialogue between world-views becomes possible and indeed***

---

<sup>8</sup> Rahner, *Theological Investigations* Vol 6, p 397.

<sup>9</sup> Vatican II 'Lumen Gentium' No. 16 as quoted by Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations* Vol 14, p 290.

<sup>10</sup> Rahner, *Theological Investigations* Vol 16, p 202.

**necessary for life...** Dialogue then becomes the only possible mode of co-existence...<sup>11</sup>

Further, because of the differences in background, two people may use the same word in different ways. Thus when someone professes to be an atheist, the assumption cannot be made that his belief system is different from one professing to be a theist! Dialogue is necessary. It has to be determined what sort of God the atheist does not believe in!

Someone who denies God, for instance, **perhaps merely denies something which does not even exist** in the opinion of the theist who really understands his theism or who – in dialogue with the atheist – comes to understand it properly for the first time or at least more properly and radically than he had done up to that moment.<sup>12</sup>

The complexity of the process of dialogue also means that **the hearer may not always hear what is being communicated**. A non-Christian may reject a Christian's presentation of the gospel of Christ. That however, does not necessarily mean that the person has truly rejected Christ and God. **Rejection of Christianity may not mean the rejection of Christ**.

For if a given individual **rejects** the Christianity brought to him through the preaching of the Church, **even then we are still never in any position to decide whether this rejection as it exists in the concrete signifies a grave fault or an act of faithfulness to his own conscience...** Thus **we can never say with ultimate certainty** whether a non-Christian who has rejected Christianity and who, in spite of a certain encounter with Christianity, does **not** become a Christian, is still following the provisional path mapped out for his own salvation which is leading him to an encounter with God, or whether he has now entered upon the way of perdition.<sup>13</sup>

The Christian evangelist must therefore take pains to understand the whole world-view of the person he is seeking to convert.

---

<sup>11</sup> Rahner, *Theological Investigations* Vol 6, p 35.

<sup>12</sup> Rahner, *Theological Investigations* Vol 6, p 38.

<sup>13</sup> Rahner, *Theological Investigations* Vol 10, p 48.

Only once a partner in a dialogue knows for certain that through the dialogue he has completely appropriated the *whole* existential experience out of which his partner expresses his propositions and opposition, can he presume to say with certainty that not only what the other says but also what he really means to say in the world-view dialogue is false or already positively and completely included in his own view in the sense in which it is really meant.<sup>14</sup>

Rahner is clear though that dialogue does not mean compromise.

There can and must be dialogue today. ***This doesn't mean a cowardly, relativistic dialogue*** in which the partners no longer take their own convictions seriously and thus cannot really talk in any true sense because they have nothing to say to each other. It means dialogue in genuine freedom and not merely in that 'toleration' and co-existence where one puts up with one's opponent merely because one does not have the power to destroy him. ***It must be a dialogue in which one risks oneself:*** an essentially universal world-view asserted absolutely must be especially capable of this and is allowed of its essences to do this.<sup>15</sup>

This dialogue must of course be conducted with a loving attitude.

The Christian knows that ***love alone is the highest light of knowledge*** and that what St Paul says about love must therefore be valid of *dialogue*...<sup>16</sup>

The necessity of love leads appropriately to the next point.

## **Love of Neighbour Indicates a Genuine Relationship with God**

This point is fundamental to Rahner's understanding of the 'anonymous Christian'. A person's love for his neighbour is evidence of his love for God. More to the point, the Scriptures teach that God regards the love shown to a neighbour as love shown to Himself. Therefore, in a real sense, the loving

---

<sup>14</sup> Rahner, *Theological Investigations* Vol 6, p 39.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p 40.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p 41.

relationship between a person and his neighbour indicates a loving relationship between that person and God.

*Love of neighbour understood as love of God: The declarations of scripture.*

...the two [great commandments] together are valid in the Synoptic tradition as the life-giving (Lk 10:28) epitome of the Old Testament revelation in the scriptures and the prophets (Mt 22:40), greater than which there is nothing (Mk 12:31). Furthermore in this Synoptic theology of love, it certainly must not be overlooked that in the eschatological discourses about Judgement, love of neighbour is given in St Matthew as the only explicit standard by which man will be judged (Mt 25:34-46).

This is not to say that the non-Christian is able to perform these acts of neighbourly love without the help of God. Rather ***these acts of love are in fact evidence of God's activity in the person.***

*The anonymous 'Christianity' of every positively moral activity.*

This opinion states that wherever man posits a positively moral act in the full exercise of his free self-disposal, this act is a positive supernatural salvific act in the economy of salvation even when it's *a posteriori* object and the explicitly given *a posteriori* motive do not spring from the positive revelation of God's Word but are in this sense 'natural'. This is so because ***God in virtue of His universal salvific will offers everyone His supernaturally divinising grace*** and thus elevates the positively moral act of man... whenever there is an absolutely moral commitment of a positive kind in the world and within the present economy of salvation, ***there takes place also a saving event***, faith, hope and charity an act of divinising grace...<sup>17</sup>

## Man was created for God

Rahner has a very positive view of the creation of man in the image of God. He argues that this means that man by definition of his creation must be able to receive God's grace.

***Grace***, as the free self-communication of God to his creature, does presuppose the ***creature***, and this in such possession of its

---

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., pp 238-239.



being and its capacities that it can stand in and on itself and bear witness to the glory of that almighty creative power and goodness which was able to say of its works that they were good... That is to say, it must be, to begin with, ***a being of unlimited openness for the limitless being of God***, therefore that being we call *spirit*... Man therefore is not only *capable* of hearing a possible word from his hidden God, but in the sense we have explained is also positively expecting it, little as he has the least right to demand it.<sup>18</sup>

Rahner describes this intrinsic ability of man to respond to God as a seed with the potential to grow:

The salvation which God, of his will to save all men, offers and effectively bestows upon the individual, is present now in its first principles and as ***a seed which is still undeveloped***. (At this stage it is called 'justifying and sanctifying grace'). In the future this will be brought to its fullness in the form of eternal life (this is called the 'vision of God'). It can only fail to be brought to this fullness if man of his own free will sinfully rejects it.<sup>19</sup>

### **The Role of the Conscience**

For Rahner the role of the conscience is crucial. He is fully aware that the conscience can be influenced by the ***human environment*** in which it develops. ***Thus it is possible that the conscience may even be instrumental in causing a person to reject Christ!*** The devout Buddhist is likely to be strongly held by his conscience to be true to his faith. Rahner's theory of the 'anonymous Christian' provides an answer for...

...the whole of mankind living before Christ as well as non-Christians since the time of Christ and all those who consciously and explicitly believe that they are ***required by their conscience to refuse*** the Gospel of Christ as this is presented to them.<sup>20</sup>

The conscience even in its fallen state represents the continuing work of God's Spirit which guides every individual.

---

<sup>18</sup> Rahner, *Theological Investigations* Vol 6, p 392.

<sup>19</sup> Rahner, *Theological Investigations* Vol 10, pp 33-34.

<sup>20</sup> Rahner, *Theological Investigations* Vol 16, p 216.

We are theologically justified in our definition of saving faith if we take into consideration that the teaching of the Church allows a man a chance of being saved *as long as he does not grievously offend his conscience by his actions*, even if he does not come in the course of his life to an explicit acceptance of the Christian message of faith. But it must nevertheless be affirmed that *a purely natural, metaphysical knowledge of God can never replace faith*. On the other hand the Church today allows for even non-Christians and atheists *who do not act against their conscience* a real chance of supernatural salvation and the Second Vatican Council explicitly reckoned on such a possibility.<sup>21</sup>

For Rahner, the simple acts of obedience of the individual to the voice of his conscience is equivalent to a Christian's response of faith to the gospel.

*... a genuine act of faith...can be found in an atheist as well, given that he is absolutely obedient to the dictates of his conscience and so accepts himself and God, at least unreflectively, in so far as he actually realises his own transcendence.*<sup>22</sup>

### **The Saving Will of God – A Continuing Reality**

For Rahner, God is always reaching out to humanity in love.

The world is drawn to its spiritual fulfilment by the Spirit of God, who directs the whole history of the world in all its length and breadth towards its proper goal. This means that every man, whatever his situation, can be saved.<sup>23</sup>

The Holy Spirit is continually at work revealing the love of God, drawing all humanity to the Father, giving to all men the grace to respond in faith.

This is expressed concretely in the communication (at least as an offer) of supernatural grace, whose transforming power is the condition of the possibility of genuine saving acts and therefore, most fundamentally, of the act of faith...*such grace should not*

---

<sup>21</sup> Rahner, *Theological Investigations* Vol 16, p 53.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p 58.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p 204.

*be thought of as an occasional event* happening periodically in a man's life...it should be conceived as *an abiding possibility* of human freedom...<sup>24</sup>

Even non-Christians can respond to this revelatory work of the Spirit.

... revelation can only be grasped and understood for what it is through the grace of faith, which is nothing else than *the self-communicating of God to the human spirit in the depths of its being.*<sup>25</sup>

### **There will be those who reject**

This is not to say that all men will be saved. There will be those who refuse to listen to their conscience.

If during his life a person is offered, in a manner which is credible to him, the chance to give objective structure and shape to his being (and therefore an opportunity of supernatural elevation), *and if he rejects this possibility, then he is deliberately denying his grace-filled transcendence as well. It is not possible to have 'anonymous faith' when its thematic expression in the Christian belief in revelation is culpably rejected.*<sup>26</sup>

Rahner's position is that all men have been included in God's plan of salvation, but there will be those who opt out of it.

...no man is excluded from salvation simply because of so-called original sin; a man can only lose his salvation through serious personal sin of his own...This possibility must really be given to *all.*<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p 56.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p 57.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., pp 58-59.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., pp 200-201.

## **The Incarnation of Christ Provides the Strongest Argument for the Ability of Man to Receive God's Grace**

Rahner is well aware of the objections to this very positive view of man. He is adamant that his position is correct. He refers to one of the cardinal doctrines of the Christian faith in support of his argument. *The incarnation of Christ must mean that human flesh in its very nature is designed to display the grace of God.*

If one takes it seriously that *God has become man*, then – it must be said – *man is that which happens when God expresses and divests himself*. Man is accordingly in the most basic definition that which God becomes if he sets out to show himself in the region of the extra-divine. And conversely, formulating it from the point of view of man: man is he who realises himself when he gives himself away into the incomprehensible mystery of God. Seen in this way, the incarnation of God is the uniquely supremely case of the actualisation of man's nature in general.<sup>28</sup>

His point is that God throughout history has *continually* been revealing Himself to man.

Rather it is that God himself, by the very fact of his own gracious act of self-bestowal, *constantly* communicates himself to man as the divine ultimate to which truth points, and as the very scope of love.<sup>29</sup>

The climax of His revelation is the incarnation of Christ.

The God-man, then, is the supreme and climactic point in God's bestowing of himself upon mankind, such that he supplies meaning to the whole of this divine self-bestowal right from its inception.<sup>30</sup>

## **The Universal Significance of the Cross of Christ**

From the viewpoint of systematic theology, Rahner has little difficulty in regarding the cross of Christ as having universal significance. This is to say

---

<sup>28</sup> Rahner, *Theological Investigations* Vol 6, p 393.

<sup>29</sup> Rahner, *Theological Investigations* Vol 10, p 37.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p 39.

that those who lived before the time of Christ are also saved by the work of the cross.

But this [the objective revelation of God in Christ] raises at least the question of how redemption understood in this way can apply *to those who lived before Christ*. Furthermore how can this situation be of relevance for the free action of those who, *though living after the time of Christ, have either no knowledge of him* at all or knowledge of a kind that does not impel their freedom to an ultimate decision?<sup>31</sup>

God's fore-knowledge of the cross helps to buttress the universal significance of its efficacy. Thus even those living after the time of Christ who have no knowledge of the cross can also be saved by its atoning work.

At least it makes it easier to understand how pre-Christian mankind and men living outside Christianity could be dependent for their salvation upon the cross of Christ, in that *the idea of God's eternal fore-knowledge of this event in time* is brought into play. This makes intelligible a possible *effect of Christ's cross operating before the time when he himself became a historical event*.<sup>32</sup>

### The Possibility of Implicit Acceptance of Grace Without Explicit Faith

Because man is created in the image of God, in one sense, all he has to do is understand his own being. In doing so, he will glimpse the glory of God. This Rahner describes as an implicit faith.

[Man] already accepts this revelation [of God] whenever he really accepts *himself completely*, for it already speaks *in* him. Prior to the *explicitness of official ecclesiastical faith* this acceptance *can be present in an implicit form* whereby a person undertakes and lives the duty of each day in the *quiet sincerity of patience*, in devotion to his material duties and the demands made upon him by the persons under his care...Therefore *no matter what a man states in his conceptual, theoretical and religious reflection*, anyone who does not say in his *heart*, 'there is no God' (like the fool in the psalm) but *testifies to him by the radical acceptance of his being, is a believer*. But if in this way

---

<sup>31</sup> Rahner, *Theological Investigations* Vol 16, p 205.

<sup>32</sup> Rahner, *Theological Investigations* Vol 16, p 209.

he believes in deed and in truth in the holy mystery of God, if he does not suppress this truth but leaves it free play, then the grace of this truth by which he allows himself to be led *is always already the grace of the Father in his Son*. And anyone who has let himself be taken hold of by this grace can be called with every right an ‘anonymous Christian’.<sup>33</sup>

He has further described this implicit faith as an ‘anonymous faith’ which is equivalent to saving faith.

By ‘anonymous faith is meant a faith which on the one hand is *necessary and effective for salvation* (under the general conditions which are required for justification and final salvation, i.e. hope and the love of God and neighbour) and on the other occurs *without an explicit and conscious relationship* (i.e. conceptual and verbal and thus objectively constituted) to the revelation of Jesus Christ contained in the Old and/or New Testament and without any explicit reference to God through an objective idea of God.<sup>34</sup>

### **Although a Person can have Implicit Faith without the Explicit Knowledge of the Gospel – the Church must make every effort to preach the Gospel**

Rahner is incensed by the suggestion that his theory of the ‘anonymous Christian’ would negate the importance of the mission of the Church to evangelize the nations.

It would be quite foolish to think that this talk about ‘anonymous Christianity’ must lessen the importance of mission, preaching, the Word of God, baptising, and so on. Anyone who wants to interpret our remarks about anonymous Christianity, in this way, has not merely fundamentally misunderstood them, but has not read our exposition of them with sufficient attention.<sup>35</sup>

He is clear that the Mission of the Church is to bring everyone to explicit faith in Christ.

---

<sup>33</sup> Rahner, *Theological Investigations* Vol 6, pp 394-395.

<sup>34</sup> Rahner, *Theological Investigations* Vol 16, p 52.

<sup>35</sup> Rahner, *Theological Investigations* Vol 6, pp 396-397.

In speaking of the universal missionary task of the Church as a right and duty of the Church herself this is taken to include the *basic duty of every man to become a Christian in an explicitly ecclesiastical form of Christianity*, because it is quite impossible to separate these two entities from one another.<sup>36</sup>

In fact, properly understood, his theory would in fact encourage a proper perspective in gospel preaching. The evangelist would first *engage in dialogue* with the people that he intends to reach. This would help to ensure that his proclamation was couched in suitable language and expressed in a way that would not be unnecessarily offensive. Knowing that God is already at work in the life of the non-Christian gives the evangelist encouragement in his task.

First we may surely say that in order to be possible or to have any hope of success missionary preaching necessarily presupposes that which we may call by the name of anonymous Christianity or by some other name. On any right understanding of the nature of the Christian faith it is clear that a missionary preaching is possible *only if we presuppose the grace of faith*.<sup>37</sup>

It also frees him from unnecessary anxiety. Should he fail to convert the non-Christian in a formal explicit sense, his work is still valid, and in the end, that person may also be included in Christ's heaven. It frees the evangelist from using manipulative language to achieve conversion – 'if you do not believe what I say, you will go to hell.'

Knowledge about the anonymous Christian does not in any way dispense him from caring and troubling about those who do not yet know the one necessary truth in its explicit affirmation in the gospel message. *But this knowledge will keep him from panic* and will give him the strength to practice that patience which – according to the Lord's saying – brings salvation to life, his own as much of that of his brother.<sup>38</sup>

---

<sup>36</sup> Rahner, *Theological Investigations* Vol 12 translated by David Bourke (London: Darton, Longman & Todd 1974), p 161.

<sup>37</sup> Rahner, *Theological Investigations* Vol 12, p 169.

<sup>38</sup> Rahner, *Theological Investigations* Vol 6, p 396.

## **It is Unfair to Condemn a People Group which has not had a Realistic Opportunity to Hear the Gospel**

Rahner concedes that *the coming of Christ must mean the abrogation of all other religions as an alternative means of salvation*. However, this abrogation does not take place all at once. Rather, as the influence of the Church gradually extends across the face of the earth, so too this gradual abrogation of the legitimacy of other religions takes place.

If we regard the history of salvation and revelation in the first place as being in some sense a *collective* entity, then it can surely be said that *this concrete ‘moment’ in time (naturally it may extend over a fairly long period) is arrived at that point at which Christianity in its explicit and ecclesiastical form became an effective reality*, making its impact and asserting its claims in history in the relevant cultural sphere to which the non-Christian religion concerned belonged. This means that the historical expansion of Christianity, which even today has not yet simply been concluded, coincides with *a progressive abrogation* of the legitimacy of these religions.<sup>39</sup>

### **Assessment of Rahner’s Theory of the ‘Anonymous Christian’**

There are only two aspects of Rahner’s presentation that I have difficulty with. The first is his starting point. He begins by assuming that some non-Christians must be included in Christ’s salvation. It would have been better for him to argue that point more directly at the onset. However, the strength of his presentation lies in the way in which he explains how it is possible for Christ to save the non-Christian. Using the broad sweeping approach of the systematic theologian he skillfully demonstrates how his theory is consistent with the other main tenets of Christianity. The incarnation, the atonement, the uniqueness of the revelation of Christ, the nature of man, the necessity of faith, the work of the Holy Spirit, the primacy of love and the mission of the Church are all neatly woven into his argument.

Secondly, his view of the nature of man is a little too optimistic. He does not deal sufficiently with man’s sinful nature, choosing rather to focus on the positive aspects of humanity. One is left with the conclusion that anyone who sincerely followed his conscience – even if that conscience was marred – would be saved! He does not deal with the question of idolatry in other

---

<sup>39</sup> Rahner, *Theological Investigations* Vol 10, p 47.



religions which is so roundly condemned in different parts of the Scriptures. The strength of Rahner's position is that he has been able to argue at least for the *possibility* of salvation for the non-Christian. Can a person involved in idolatrous practices be saved by Christ? I would have liked Rahner to have answered that question directly himself. He does not. If I have understood Rahner correctly, he might reply as follows: 'If that idol worshipper in sincerely following his conscience which has been molded by his religion *also displayed in his life the character of sacrificial love*, there is every possibility that he is an 'anonymous Christian.'

## Bibliography

- *Documents of Vatican II* edited by Augustin P. Flannery W.B. Eerdmans 1975
- Hick, John. *God and the Universe of Faiths*, The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1973.
- Rahner, Karl. *Theological Investigations*, 22 Volumes. Trans. Cornelius Ernst et al. London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1965-1991.

**Rev Norman Wong Cheong Sau**

Senior Pastor of Covenant Community Methodist Church.