Landas 25 (2011) 207–236

KARL RAHNER'S THEOLOGY OF GRACE

The Supernatural Existential

Salvador G. Agualada, Jr., C.M.F.

1. Introduction

Karl Rahner's theology of grace, which is the basic presupposition for many of his central thoughts and ideas, hinges on a very fundamental theological assertion—that God is always present, inescapably so, at the center of our human life.[1] In an almost lapidary statement, he asserts that "'God has given himself to man in direct proximity': perhaps the essence of Christianity can be reduced to this formula."[2] His key insight on the supernatural existential derives from his faith-filled conviction that God's grace, which is God's communication of his very self to man, is constitutive of human life, and that this radically and marvelously transforms the

[1]Almost like a paraphrase of Augustine's famous line about God being much closer to him (Augustine) than he is to himself, Karl Rahner, in his classic book, *Encounters with Silence*, addresses himself to God in these words: "You are the inmost center of my heart, closer to me than I am to myself" (K. Rahner, *Encounters with Silence* [Indiana: St. Augustine's Press, 1999], 9).

[2]K. Rahner, "Anonymous Christians," in *Theological Investigations* VI (London: Darton, Longman &Todd Ltd., 1969), 394.

https://publications.lst.edu/

world into "a world of grace."[3] It is the truth of the ubiquitousness of grace that Rahner drives home again and again in many of his writings: that "every man who comes into the world is pursued by God's grace,"[4] and that "[t]he world is permanently graced at its root, the inmost center of the conscious subjects. It is born up by God's self-communication even before free creatures decide whether to accept this proffered grace. It is graced, whether or not it seems so to our jaded sensibilities."[5] Grace is neither detraction from, nor strange appendage to, the genuinely human, but the fulfillment of man's fundamental openness to the Mystery dynamically summoning him to self-realization. It is Rahner's conviction that the Mystery grounding all human striving for self-fulfillment is not indifferent but goes out of itself in its deepest yearning to lavish itself on humanity in radical self-bestowal, in total self-giving love.[6]

This paper is basically an exploration of Rahner's theology of grace, particularly his concept of the supernatural existential. It begins with an apt consideration of man whom Rahner sees as characterized by transcendence, as an infinite openness to the Absolute, as a being of unlimited transcendentality. It then examines the relationship between grace and nature, centering on Rahner's critique of the extrinsicist notion of grace and nature and his insistence on the necessity of the idea of "pure nature" for the defense of the gratuitousness of grace. The last section aims at articulating Rahner's basic insight on the supernatural existential (which is the foundation of, and, in fact,

---

[3]This phrase is the very title of Leo J. O'Donovan's book. Cf. L. J. O'Donovan, ed., *An Introduction to the Themes and Foundations of Karl Rahner's Theology* (New York: Seabury Press, 1980).

[4]K. Rahner, "Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions," in *Theological Investigations* V (London: Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd., 1966), 130.

[5]K. Rahner, "How to Receive a Sacrament and Mean It," *Theology Digest* 19 (1971): 228–229.

[6]S. J. Duffy, "Experience of Grace," in D. Marmion & M. E. Hines, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Rahner* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 44–45.

https://publications.lst.edu/

contains in germ, his entire theology of grace) by looking at grace as fundamentally God's self-communication to the human who is seen as the event of such a gracious divine self-bestowal and which renders the whole of human existence touched and permeated by God's grace as a result of God's universal saving will.

2. Man as Infinite Dynamism and Openness Towards the Absolute

In Rahner's theology of grace, the human being is seen as basically a creature whose life and existence is ontologically grounded in and dynamically oriented towards God. He suggests then that theology as a whole may be properly called *anthropocentric*, and argues that such an emphasis, instead of spelling the end of theocentrism in theology, actually expresses theology's theocentric character.

> As soon as man is understood as the being who is absolutely transcended in respect to God, "anthropocentricity" and "theocentricity" in theology are not opposites but strictly one and the same thing, seen from two sides. Neither of the two aspects can be comprehended at all without the other.[7]

Rahner thus regards his theology as characterized by "transcendental anthropology."[8] He begins with the human being whom he sees as characterized by transcendence, a term which indicates that "the human being is a propulsion beyond himself,"[9] "an ever greater openness to God."[10] In every human act, God is implicitly revealed

---

[7]K. Rahner, "Theology and Anthropology," in *Theological Investigations* IX (London: Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd., 1972), 28.

[8]Rahner, "Theology and Anthropology," 29.

[9]J. J. O'Donnell, *The Mystery of the Triune God* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1988), 27.

[10]J. J. O'Donnell, *Life in the Spirit* (Roma: Gregorian University Press, 2004), 6. "To transcend means simply to go beyond: transcendental experience is the experience of going beyond all the things we know and choose and love, even

https://publications.lst.edu/

as the term of transcendence. There is, thus, a religious dimension to all human experience and the totality of human existence, although this dimension is hidden, anonymous and nameless. Since God is undeniably present in all human experiences, there is therefore a natural revelation of God to every human being. For Rahner, man is a dynamism towards the Absolute: "he is from God, and directed towards God,"[11] and thus all his acts are an implicit affirmation of God. "The infinite horizon affirmed in all knowing and loving is nothing other than the absolute being of God."[12] It is along these lines that Rahner understands man as a "spiritual" being who exists with an absolute supernatural orientation. In his *Hearer of the Word*, he writes: "Human persons are spirits and, as such, we always already stand before the infinite God …. [I]n the daily drift of our existence … we continually reach out into the domain that only the fullness of God's absolute being can fill."[13] Calling it the "basic make-up" of the human person, affirmed in all his acts of knowledge and freedom, Rahner describes man's spiritual nature as

> … [a] … life … reaching [out] ceaselessly for the absolute, in openness toward God … [which] … is not something that may happen or not happen to us once in awhile, as we please. It is the condition of the possibility of what we are and have to be and always also are in our most humdrum daily life. Only that makes us human: that we are always already on the way to God, whether or not we know it expressly,

---

as we are knowing and choosing and loving them—and when we go beyond all particular things, what we go towards is, on Rahner's account, God" (K. Kilby, "Karl Rahner," in D. F. Ford & R. Muers, eds., *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology Since 1918*, 3rd ed. [Victoria (Australia): Blackwell Publishing, 2007], 99).

[11]K. Rahner, "The Dignity and Freedom of Man," in *Theological Investigations* II (London: Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd., 1974), 238.

[12]Duffy, "Experience of Grace," 48.

[13]K. Rahner, *Hearer of the Word* (New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1994), 54. As spirit, a human being is "a being of unlimited openness for the limitless being of God" (Rahner, "Anonymous Christians," 392).

https://publications.lst.edu/

> whether or not we will it. We are forever the infinite openness of the finite for God.[14]

For Rahner, "it is obvious that human beings are constituted as religious beings. God belongs inescapably to human experience."[15] Whether we open ourselves to or shut ourselves from its presence, our entire life is dynamically oriented towards this holy Mystery which is the absolute ground and horizon of our existence. "Generally pre-reflexive[,] this primal awareness of God may be ignored, suppressed, even denied, which easily happens since it comes in spatio-temporal experience whose depth may elude us," yet, "[even] in the absence of reflective awareness of the existential, humans remain nonetheless, always graced by an inner dynamism thrusting toward the God who calls and gives Godself."[16]

Not only in the totality of man's being is man searching beyond himself to a transcendent ground; particularly his acts of thinking and choosing are grounded in the absolute reality of God. Take, for instance, man's acts of thinking. Rahner proposes that man is a "transcendental consciousness" and asserts that within the operations of the mind we can find a dynamic movement oriented towards an infinite being which transcends the mind. Rahner looks to the actual functioning of the mental act, on the dynamic process of what occurs in particular acts of thinking, and discovers that the very act of asking questions, for example, about the things that are beyond man presupposes an infinite ground, such that in the possession of knowledge or intelligent apprehension, man goes beyond himself and moves towards an infinite being who is the source of everything that he finds in the world. William Dych explains this quite simply:

> All the knowledge we acquire always gives rise to further questions. When pushed far enough all our clarities trail off into obscurity; the chain of scientific logic hangs loose at both ends. The more we know,

---

[14]Rahner, *Hearer of the Word*, 53.

[15]O'Donnell, *Life in the Spirit*, 17.

[16]Duffy, "Experience of Grace," 49 and 47.

https://publications.lst.edu/

> the more we know we don't know, and in this known unknown we have transcended our knowledge.[17]

In that very performance of his intellectual life, man comes, however faintly, to the consciousness that his entire life is not only permeated but also and especially sustained by the hidden presence of grace. Implicit within all acts of the mind, indeed, is man's immediate and unthematic knowledge of his transcendent ground. Indeed, Rahner's "transcendental anthropology" provides us a picture of a human being who is an absolute openness in his unrestricted transcendence.

> That God is obliquely anticipated whereunto … of human knowing and loving is derived by Rahner from his transcendental analysis of human being …. Not only are humans open to and in quest of the infinite, they are also drawn by it in self-bestowal.[18]

3. Re-conceptualizing the Relationship between Nature and Grace

3.1 Critique of the Neo-Scholastic, Extrinsicist View of Nature and Grace

The driving force that impelled Rahner to introduce and develop the concept of the supernatural existential was provided by what he believed to be the essentially erroneous doctrine of nature and grace prevalent in the Church since the mid nineteenth century, conceptualized in a doctrine called "extrinsecism"[19] (more commonly spelled as "extrinsicism," the spelling thus adopted in this work), or

---

[17]W. V. Dych, "Theology in a New Key," in L. J. O'Donovan, ed., *An Introduction to the Themes and Foundations of Karl Rahner's Theology* (New York: Seabury Press, 1980), 6.

[18]Duffy, "Experience of Grace," 43–44.

[19]Cf. K. Rahner, "Concerning the Relationship Between Nature and Grace," in *Theological Investigations* I (London: Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd., 1974), 298. Henceforth referred to as "Relationship Between Nature and Grace."

https://publications.lst.edu/

the "textbook" understanding of grace and nature,[20] and characterized by the neo-scholastic *duplex ordo* theology.[21]

Patrick Burke, in his book *Reinterpreting Rahner: A Critical Study of His Major Themes*, sums up what probably are the two most fundamental features of this neo-Scholastic concept of the relationship between nature and grace from the Rahnerian point of view.[22] First,

> [a]ccording to this view, grace often appears as a mere superstructure, imposed on nature by God's free decision in such a way that the relationship between the two is no more intense than noncontradiction, no more than a *potentia oboedentialis* understood purely negatively.[23]

To employ Rahner's own words, grace, in this extrinsicist view, "appears … as a mere superstructure, very fine in itself certainly, which is imposed upon nature by God's free decree,"[24] "as being merely a superstructure imposed from without upon a nature in itself indifferent with regard to it,"[25] "a superstructure beyond the realm of consciousness, … though … acknowledged to be the most sublime and divine element in man, his only salutary possession."[26]

In this two-storied world, grace is considered an accidental add-on, remaining beyond human experience, and superimposed on nature viewed as self-sufficient and self-contained, and nature is "merely

---

[20]Cf. P. Burke, *Reinterpreting Rahner: A Critical Study of His Major Themes* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 54. Henceforth referred to as *Reinterpreting Rahner*.

[21]D. Coffey, "The Whole Rahner on the Supernatural Existential," *Theological Studies* (Milwaukee) 65/1 (2004): 103. Henceforth referred to as "The Whole Rahner."

[22]Cf. Burke, *Reinterpreting Rahner*, 54.

[23]Burke, *Reinterpreting Rahner*, 54.

[24]Rahner, "Relationship Between Nature and Grace," 298.

[25]Rahner, "Relationship Between Nature and Grace," 303.

[26]K. Rahner, "Nature and Grace," in *Theological Investigations* IV (London: Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd., 1974), 166.

https://publications.lst.edu/

'disturbed' by the purely external 'decree' of God commanding the acceptance of the supernatural."[27] Such a relationship between nature and grace "depended on a non-repugnance in nature understood in scholastic terms as an 'obediential potency', a capacity to receive gifts not incompatible with nature,"[28] as an element that does not contradict the elevation of nature. Indeed, nature was related to grace only extrinsically, by divine decree, and negatively, by a non-repugnance.[29] Nature was understood, at best, as tolerant or as being non-repugnant towards grace.

The problem is that, when presented in this way, with grace as a mere superstructure added to the soul or as an adornment extrinsic to nature, God cannot, even if such an addendum may bring ultimate perfection to human nature, be considered as the innermost goal and ultimate yearning of man.[30] "It is also difficult to conceive the desirability of such gifts to a nature already complete in itself without grace."[31] As Burke, reflecting Rahner's insight, comments, even if

---

[27]Rahner, "Relationship Between Nature and Grace," 299.

[28]Duffy, "Experience of Grace,"46.

[29]Rahner, "Relationship Between Nature and Grace," 309. In Rahner's own words:

> Grace is, it is true, an unsurpassable perfection of nature; God as the Lord of this nature can command man to submit to his *de facto* will and to be receptive to his grace, which direct man to a supernatural life and end. But of itself nature has only a "*potentia obedientialis*" to such an end, and this capacity is thought of as negatively as possible. It is no more than non-repugnance to such an elevation. (Rahner, "Nature and Grace," 167)

[30]K. Weger, *Karl Rahner: An Introduction to His Theology* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1980), 105. Henceforth referred to as *Karl Rahner*. Duffy brings to the surface what is fundamentally at stake in this argument: "[Were] grace an alien superstructure imposed on self-enclosed nature from outside history and experience by divine decree, it could only appear as an intrusion responding to no felt need or yearning in humanity" (Duffy, "Experience of Grace," 50–51).

[31]Duffy, "Experience of Grace," 46.

https://publications.lst.edu/

"[nature] acknowledges the end and the means of the supernatural order as, in themselves, its highest goods, … it is not at all clear why it should be much concerned with these goods."[32] It is not surprising then that man should take very minimal interest in this graced superstructure of his being. "After all he does not find grace where he finds himself, in the immediate activation of his supernatural being."[33] And because "this supernatural was displaced into a region beyond consciousness, as an unconscious modality of what was spiritual and moral in nature, … it was very hard to say what use it was at all."[34] Indeed, man's vocation to supernatural communion not only appears, in this conception of grace, as a disturbance to pure nature, which otherwise acts in its own domain, but the theory also risks ascribing all that man experiences to nature even though all are *de facto* experiences of grace or of graced nature.

Secondly,

> according to this textbook view, man can know what *precisely* pure human nature is and how far *precisely* it extends. It is tacitly presupposed that whatever man comes to know, independently of revelation, about himself or in himself belongs to this nature and, therefore, that a sharply circumscribed concept of man's pure nature can be produced out of the anthropology of everyday experience.[35]

For Rahner, however, "this 'pure' nature is not for that reason an unambiguously delimitable, de-finable quantity," and man "can never find the nature he wants in a 'chemically pure' state, separated from its supernatural existential."[36] In its strictly theological understanding, nature "does not mean a state of reality, intelligible in itself and experienced by us separately … on top of which … an additional higher

[32]Burke, *Reinterpreting Rahner*, 54.

[33]Rahner, "Nature and Grace," 168.

[34]Rahner, "Nature and Grace," 168.

[35]Burke, *Reinterpreting Rahner*, 54.

[36]Rahner, "Relationship Between Nature and Grace," 314 and 315.

https://publications.lst.edu/

reality would be superimposed."[37] Considering that all men in their concrete existence live within the ambit of the supernatural existential, no clear and absolute division can be drawn between nature and grace, and one can never easily delineate what in human life is of nature and what of grace.[38] Pure human nature never existed in a time before grace was "superimposed" on it.[39]There is no such thing as a natural human existence, for the whole human life is permeated by grace. We cannot speak, then, of what human being or human life would be without God's grace because we do not have any experience of ourselves and our life without that grace, and because we are also conditioned by that grace even when we refuse it in sin or guilt.[40] Indeed,

> [m]an's factual nature … is never "pure" nature, but nature situated in a supernatural dispensation from which man—even unbelieving and sinful man—cannot escape the nature that is always being transformed

[37]K. Rahner, "Grace," in *Sacramentum Mundi* II (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968), 417.

[38]Rahner, "Relationship Between Nature and Grace," 314.

[39]"It is not as though pure nature existed first in its own right and was then determined … Nor is the existential simply added to nature: it transforms nature in its own coming into being, and the transformation will remain forever, unrelated by anything the person may or may not do subsequently" (Coffey, "The Whole Rahner," 101).

[40]Weger, *Karl Rahner*, 108. For Rahner, though, this existential order is not the only imaginable order, for human beings could also lead meaningful lives in an order devoid of grace where they encounter only divine silence (Duffy, "Experience of Grace," 51). Such a supernatural fulfillment is not owed to man, and he seemingly can attain fulfillment in his life in a lesser natural good, for "[o]f itself, nature would find its perfection just as readily and harmoniously in its own proper realm, in a purely natural end, without an immediate intuition of God in the beatific vision" (Rahner, "Nature and Grace," 167). Yet, even though God could have created human beings without the vocation to a supernatural life and destiny with him, in reality he has never done so, and the only human being who exists is the creature under the influence of grace.

https://publications.lst.edu/

> (not, it should be noted, necessarily justified) by the supernatural saving grace offered by God.[41]

Rahner thus dismantled this double-decker world and purged the dualism of extrinsicism bedeviling Catholic theology by pointing out to the transcendental structure of man, that man is not simply natural but rather one

> who has been called by God to supernatural salvation … [a] … state of being called by God—or by grace, which is God himself … [which] … forms a permanent and ontological factor which determines man's being, with the result that man's experience of himself is also an experience of God and at the same time an experience of grace.[42]

The human person, then, bears an intrinsic dynamism to God which, "far from being a mere non-repugnance to grace, is an openness to, a hunger for God. Humanity is unrestricted desire for God."[43]

3.2 The Necessity of the Theoretical Concept of "Pure Nature" For the Defense of the Gratuitousness of Grace

In reaction to the extrinsicist view of the relationship between nature and grace by the proponents of the neo-scholastic tradition, the *Nouvelle Theologie* "sought to emphasize the intrinsic desire of man for God and the orientation of nature to grace, for which it was created …

---

[41]Weger, *Karl Rahner*, 106–107. In speaking about the relationship between nature and grace in an interview, Rahner said:

> There is no single human action in which God does not communicate himself to us, in which, in other words, his grace is not, either reflectively or unreflectively, at work and aspects of revelation are involved. It is simply not possible for man, who has grace as an existential aspect of his existence that cannot be avoided, to make a clear distinction … between … what is natural freedom and what is freedom as a result of grace. (Weger, *Karl Rahner,* 108–109)

[42]Weger, *Karl Rahner*, 88.

[43]Duffy, "Experience of Grace," 51.

https://publications.lst.edu/

[claiming that] … the inner reference of man to grace is constituent of man's nature in such a way that the latter cannot be conceived without it."[44] Against the *Nouvelle Theologie*,[45] Rahner insists that the absolute gratuity of grace must be the starting point for all Catholic discussions of grace.[46] He formulates the issue at stake: "But is this inner reference of man to grace a constituent of his 'nature' in such a way that the latter cannot be conceived without it, i.e., as pure nature, and hence such that the concept of *natura pura* becomes incapable of complete definition?"[47] As John Galvin, echoing Rahner's criticism of the *Nouvelle Theologie*, argues: "If God's self-communication were part of the nature of a given creature, or if a creature had by nature a right to grace, then God's offer of himself to that creature would not be free to a freely chosen partner."[48] The precise point at issue in this particular theology is not only that grace can no longer be said to be gratuitous, but also that grace is not gratuitous for an imagined or hypothetical human being as it is for the human being already in actual existence.[49]

---

[44]Burke, *Reinterpreting Rahner*, 55.

[45]Coffey, comparing the theology of the *Nouvelle Theologie* with that of Rahner, rightfully observes:

> The precise point of difference between Rahner and the *nouvele theologie* was that while the latter regarded the unconditional desire as belonging to human nature as such, Rahner maintained that it was already a gift of grace and hence was supernatural. For him the unconditional desire was the immediate consequence of the supernatural existential and hence shared its supernatural character. (Coffey, "The Whole Rahner," 102)

[46]Burke, *Reinterpreting Rahner*, 55. In footnote no. 20 of Burke's article, the author notes that "[the] preservation of the absolute gratuity of grace is one of Rahner's central concerns" (Burke, *Reinterpreting Rahner*, 55.)

[47]Rahner, "Relationship Between Nature and Grace," 303.

[48]J. P. Galvin, "The Invitation of Grace," in L. J. O'Donovan, ed., *An Introduction to the Themes and Foundations of Karl Rahner's Theology* (New York: Seabury Press, 1980), 71.

[49]Burke, *Reinterpreting Rahner*, 55–56.

https://publications.lst.edu/

For Rahner, grace is a free and gratuitous gift of God, who is under no obligation to give himself as a gift. It is therefore supernatural, that is, no way owed to man. In his own words:

> In this sense, the grace of God's self-communication is supernatural, in other words it is not owed to man (or to *any* creature) even prior to his unworthiness as a sinner. It is not posited with man's inalienable essence (his "nature"). Consequently in itself even in the absence of sin it could be refused to man by God (yet if offered it could not be refused by man without guilt). It is unmerited because it is a participation in the reality which in itself is solely that of God himself. Moreover, it can only be received if its very reception is made possible by God. And this is again not due to man.[50]

Still, the fact that grace is free and gratuitous does not mean that it is not given to some, for we know by faith and revelation that God desires the salvation of all humans.

Rahner, then, suggests a more subtle distinction, not only between nature and grace but also between pure nature and concrete nature:[51] the latter being human nature as it exists as a result of God's acts of creation and grace, and the former being a theoretical concept that refers to what is minimally required for a being to be human. The value of such a distinction is that in upholding that human beings are graced in their actual nature, Rahner agrees with the *Nouvelle Theologie*. However, in holding fast to pure nature as a theoretical concept, he tries to integrate into his theology the encyclical *Humani Generis* which declares that in order to protect the gratuity of grace, that God is free to give or withhold grace, we must affirm that God could have created human

---

[50]Rahner, "Grace," 417. In the same article, even prior to this quotation, Rahner writes:

> God's self-communication in his own divine life, both as given, and as accepted by man, is essentially God's free, personal, uncovenanted favour. In itself it is a free gift in relation to man, not merely insofar as he is a sinner (i.e., someone who culpably shuts himself to God's offer of himself and to God's will as this is expressed in the whole of human reality), but even prior to this. (Rahner, "Grace," 416)

[51]Cf. Burke, *Reinterpreting Rahner*, 69–70.

https://publications.lst.edu/

beings without giving them any grace or ordering them to a supernatural destiny with him in beatific vision, even if in the present dispensation, no human being exists that has only pure nature as its essence since all men are permeated by grace in their very essence. Indeed, in order to show the unexactedness of grace, Rahner conceives of the possibility of "pure human nature," a nature devoid of God's grace, and

> … insists on the possibility of a pure human nature that has not been finalized supernaturally and in this way ensures that God's grace is free and gratuitous. At the same time, however, he maintains that this possibility has never been a reality. In concrete terms, this means that man, in his factual existence, is not pure nature and does not experience himself as such.[52]

For Rahner, the concept of pure human nature

> is not an empty concept of otiose theological speculation but a concept which, in the long run, is the necessary background against which one recognizes that the beatific vision is a gratuitous grace, not merely not due to man as a sinner, but not due to man even as a creature.[53]

In the concrete economy of human existence, however, this "pure human nature" is nothing but a theological construct, a "remainder,"[54] or "a 'remainder concept', … what is left over as remainder when this inmost centre is subtracted from the substance of his concrete

---

[52]Weger, *Karl Rahner*, 106–107. For Eamonn Conway,

> [a] merely theoretical assumption rather than an assertion of a state which was once realized in history, "pure nature" describes nature as unaffected by grace, even though we have no experience of this. According to Rahner, there was never a human being who was ungraced as such … In our actual experience we know nothing of what comes from nature alone. (E. Conway, *The Anonymous Christian—A Relativised Christianity?: An Evaluation of Hans Urs von Balthasar's Criticisms of Karl Rahner's Theory of the Anonymous Christian* [New York: Peter Lang, 1993], 14, henceforth referred to as *The Anonymous Christian—A Relativised Christianity?*)

[53]Rahner, "Nature and Grace," 185.

[54]Rahner, "Relationship Between Nature and Grace," 302.

https://publications.lst.edu/

quiddity, his 'nature',"[55] or "a reality [that] must be postulated in man which remains over when the supernatural existential as unexacted is subtracted, and must have a meaning and a possibility of existence even when the supernatural existential is thought of as lacking."[56] Pure human nature, then, is "what remains when one theoretically, and impossibly in the present economy, subtracts the supernatural existential"[57]; "a residual concept, what is left if we mentally bracket the supernatural existential."[58]

Yet, again, pure nature refers to no actually existing condition, for nature never exists on its own, but only and always under the influence of the divine self-communication, which is grace. It is

> only a contrasting concept and not a reality in man, within which it is no longer possible to distinguish between what man is in the light of pure nature, and what he is *de facto*, and therefore what he experiences as the supernatural raising up of his experience: in other words as the supernatural existential element in his life.[59]

Nature, then, "in this sense continues to be a remainder concept, but a necessary and objectively justified one, if one wishes to achieve reflexive consciousness of that unexactedness of grace which goes together with man's inner, unconditional ordination to it."[60] It remains a necessary conceptual construct pointing up the gratuitousness of God's grace by calling to mind a world that could have been without grace had God willed it.

---

[55]Rahner, "Relationship Between Nature and Grace," 313.

[56]Rahner, "Relationship Between Nature and Grace," 313–314.

[57]M. G. Lawler & T. A. Salzman, "Karl Rahner and Human Nature: Implications for Ethics," *Irish Theological Quarterly* (Maynooth) 74/4 (2009): 391. Henceforth referred to as "Karl Rahner and Human Nature."

[58]Duffy, "Experience of Grace," 51.

[59]Weger, *Karl Rahner*, 107–108.

[60]Rahner, "Relationship Between Nature and Grace," 315.

https://publications.lst.edu/

> Our actual nature is *never* "pure" nature. It is a nature installed in a supernatural order which man can never leave, even as a sinner and unbeliever. It is a nature which is continually being determined (which does not mean justified) by the supernatural grace of salvation offered to it. And these "existentials" of man's concrete, "historical" nature are not purely states of being beyond consciousness.[61]

Man is indeed "a being which is absolutely ordained for the immediate possession of God," and man "will only be mistaken if he maintains that this unconditional longing is an essential element of 'pure' nature or if he says that such pure nature, which does not exist, *could* not exist."[62]

4. A Theology of Grace: The Supernatural Existential

4.1 Uncreated Grace as God's Offer and Bestowal of Self to Man

One of the most significant contributions of Rahner in the theological discussion about grace, years before the Second Vatican Council, was his reinterpretation of the traditional understanding between created grace and uncreated grace and his proposal for the realignment of the widespread understanding of this relationship. In the neo-Scholastic theology that dominated the pre-Vatican II Church, "heavy emphasis was laid on the role of created grace as that which qualitatively modified man, enabling him to receive the divine indwelling, known as uncreated grace."[63] Even if differences among various scholastic theories may be found,

> it is true of all the scholastic theories that they see God's indwelling and his conjunction with the justified man as based exclusively upon

[61]Rahner, "Nature and Grace," 183.

[62]Rahner, "Nature and Grace," 185.

[63]Burke, *Reinterpreting Rahner*, 48.

https://publications.lst.edu/

> created grace. In virtue of the fact that the created grace is imparted to the soul, God imparts himself to it and dwells in it. Thus what we call uncreated grace (i.e., God as bestowing himself upon man) is a function of created grace.[64]

For Rahner, though, such an understanding of the relationship between created and uncreated grace does not do justice to the evidence of the Scriptures and the Church Fathers. For St. Paul (and also for St. John, according to Rahner), "man's inner sanctification is first and foremost a communication of the personal Spirit of God, that is to say, in scholastic terms, a *donum in creatum*; and sees every created grace … as a consequence and a manifestation of the possession of the uncreated grace."[65] For the Church Fathers, "the created gifts of grace [are] a *consequence* of God's substantial communication to justified men."[66] Burke thus concludes: "The sources of revelation show that we fail to do justice to the essence of uncreated grace if we hold that man has uncreated grace only because he first possesses created grace."[67] God's presence in man as uncreated grace is not the result of an efficient causation of created grace, but is "logically and really prior to created grace," such that it really "precedes created grace, which, as the ultimate disposition to the union, can exist only when God's formal causality is actually being exercised upon man."[68]

However, though the primary gift is God himself (the uncreated grace), the divine presence is inevitably accompanied by effects (created grace) in the recipient of God's bestowal of self. "[This] divine self-communication, in which God makes himself a constitutive principle

---

[64]K. Rahner, "Some Implications of the Scholastic Concept of Uncreated Grace," in *Theological Investigations* I (London: Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd., 1974), 324. Henceforth referred to as "Scholastic Concept of Uncreated Grace."

[65]Rahner, "Scholastic Concept of Uncreated Grace," 322.

[66]Rahner, "Scholastic Concept of Uncreated Grace," 322.

[67]Burke, *Reinterpreting Rahner*, 51.

[68]Burke, *Reinterpreting Rahner*, 52.

https://publications.lst.edu/

of the created existent without thereby losing his absolute, ontological independence, has 'divinizing' effects in the finite existent in whom this self-communication takes place."[69] These effects are not identical with God himself, for, being created gifts, they are finite. Hence, the Scholastic tradition has distinguished between uncreated grace and created grace. Uncreated grace is God himself in his loving self-communication to man; created grace is a divine gift, other than God but above man's natural powers, freely offered to us by God as transforming effects of his divine indwelling. For Rahner, the primary understanding of grace, a conception that marks a sharp departure from the scholastic tradition, is that of the uncreated grace which is the uncreated gift of God's own life bestowed upon man (and created grace as a consequence of uncreated grace, that is, of God's offer of his divine self to human beings), and his emphasis that the giver and the gift are identical.[70]

Rahner succeeds in establishing the concept of God's self-communication in a Scholastic language by reviving the Patristic notion of uncreated grace and incorporating that into a Scholastic conceptual structure as a quasi-formal cause. Simply put, this means that God communicates his very self to man and in this divine self-bestowal God becomes the intrinsic, co-constitutive principle of the human subject himself. The most distinguishing aspect of God's self-communication, then, is that it points to a relationship between God and man which can and must be understood analogously to a causality in which the cause becomes the intrinsic, constitutive principle

[69]K. Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd., 1978), 120. Henceforth referred to as *Foundations of Christian Faith.*

[70]The identity between the giver and the gift will be discussed in the next section, but by God's self-gift, Rahner means that God bestows himself to us in unsurpassable closeness: the giver is himself the gift. God does not merely bestow on us finite, created gifts, or transmit to us truths about himself; he gives us his very self.

https://publications.lst.edu/

of that which is being caused.[71] In explaining the mystery of God's self-communication, Rahner has recourse to the distinction between formal and efficient causality. In efficient causality, God brings forth something different from himself, such as in the act of creation. But in the gift of grace, when God acts supernaturally in the world, he exerts a different kind of causality, which Rahner calls "quasi-formal causality." Rahner stresses that this new "relationship" of God to the human cannot be brought under the category of efficient causality but only of formal causality:

> … for all the strictly supernatural realities with which we are acquainted (the hypostatic union, the *visio beatifica* and—as we shall go on to show here—the supernatural bestowal of grace) have this in common, that in them there is expressed a relationship of God to a creature which is not one of efficient causality (a production *out* of the cause …), and which must consequently fall under the head of formal causality (a taking up *into* the ground …): the ontological principle of the subsistence of a finite nature in the one case, the ontological principle of a finite knowledge in the other.[72]

In formal causality, "a particular existent, a principle of being is a constitutive element in another subject by the fact that it communicates itself to this subject, and does not just cause something different from itself."[73] God, the uncreated grace, becomes the formal cause of our graced acts; he becomes a co-constitutive element of the human subject. Rahner, however, appends the prefix *quasi* in order to ensure that in spite of God acting as the formal cause of human supernatural acts, he still remains the wholly infinite, transcendent and sovereign God. For Rahner, this is not exceptional from a theological point of view because whenever we apply to God a category formed from our human experiences in the world, we have to modify it and use it in

[71]Weger, *Karl Rahner*, 109–110. Cf. Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 120–122.

[72]Rahner, "Scholastic Concept of Uncreated Grace," 329–330.

[73]Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 121.

https://publications.lst.edu/

an analogous way. In his own words, he says: "The only reason why it is specially to be recommended in our case that the *quasi* should be explicitly added is that it provides an emphatic reminder of the analogical nature of our concepts in the matter of a relationship to the world known only through Revelation."[74]

Rahner's use of the prefix *quasi* is indeed his solution to the problem of how we can understand God's offer of himself to man without compromising his absolute divine immutability and transcendence or without making grace purely accidental or extrinsic to the creature, since the category of formal causality can seem to imply a reduction of God's transcendence. It is also his manner of pointing up the analogical character of God-talk. Moreover, it is his way of understanding the dynamics of grace as man's elevation to participate in God's bestowal of himself without ceasing to be a creature and God's communication of himself to become a constitutive dimension of the creature's fulfillment without ceasing to be God. Though an inexpressible union takes place between God and man in this divine self-communication where God becomes a co-constitutive dimension of human subjectivity, man is not absorbed into God and God does not cease being transcendent. Human subjectivity though is modified by God's indwelling presence. Human being remains an openness to God (transcendence) but now that openness to God is transformed by God's self-bestowal, by God's unsurpassable nearness. The horizon of human transcendence is transformed, lived *now* under the new modality of God's loving nearness.[75]

4.2 Man as the Event of God's Free and Forgiving Self-communication[76]

For Rahner, human salvation consists of no other than God himself, present to us in an absolute, unsurpassable proximity, a God

[74]Rahner, "Scholastic Concept of Uncreated Grace," 330–331.

[75]O'Donnell, *Life in the Spirit*, 24.

[76]The title of this section is derived from the very title of Chapter IV of Rahner's *Foundations of Christian Faith* (p. 116); consequently, the discussion in this section will rely heavily on Rahner's ideas in that chapter.

https://publications.lst.edu/

who is not just the holy mystery, the incomprehensible, the radically remote, always distant, ever-receding horizon and *telos* of human transcendence but also the absolute nearness, offering himself in self-communication as the *a priori* horizon of human existence and fulfillment.[77] It is along these lines that he defines man as "the event of a free, unmerited and forgiving, and absolute self-communication of God,"[78] a creature who "always and everywhere stands before the claim of God's self-communication in grace."[79] In this self-communication, "God in his most proper reality makes himself the innermost constitutive element of man."[80]

Since the goal of God's self-communication is to enable each human being to enter into a loving relationship with him and thus experience salvation, it does not achieve its purpose until freely accepted by man in knowledge and freedom. Indeed, uncreated grace, God's self-communication, is always offered to us for our free acceptance, whose absence will continue to render our account of human reality incomplete. Along these lines, Rahner insists that God is not just the giver and the gift all at the same time, but also the ground or the condition for the acceptance of the gift which is himself. God, the giver, offers himself not only as "gift" but also as the very condition that makes the acceptance of the gift possible, which thus implies that God's self-communication must be present in us "as the prior condition of possibility for its acceptance."[81] In a very famous

[77]"God himself as the abiding and holy mystery, as the incomprehensible ground of man's transcendent existence is not only the God of infinite distance, but also wants to be the God of absolute closeness in a true self-communication, and he is present in this way in the spiritual depths of our existence as well as in the concreteness of our corporeal history" (Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 137).

[78]Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 116.

[79]Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 157.

[80]Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 157.

[81]Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 128. "Consequently, man can never even begin to have anything to do with God or to approach God without being

https://publications.lst.edu/

line, God, for Rahner, "is at once giver and gift and the ground of acceptance of the gift."[82]

As regards the identification between the divine giver and the divine gift, Rahner writes: "It is decisive for an understanding of God's self-communication to man to grasp that the giver in his own being is the gift, that in and through his own being the giver gives himself to the creatures as their own fulfillment."[83] Yet, Rahner also stresses that such an acceptance of the divine self-offer is itself God's grace, that God's bestowal of himself makes its own acceptance possible through the initial effects of his presence in the recipient. "[The] acceptance of God's self-communication must be based upon and is based upon God's offer itself, and hence … the acceptance of grace is once again an event of grace itself."[84] It is purely and ultimately God's prerogative "since only the absolute being of God can not only establish what is different from himself without becoming subject to this difference

already borne by God's grace" (Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 146).

[82]Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 125. In a more elaborate language, Rahner writes:

> God's self-communication is given not only as a gift, but also as the necessary condition which makes possible an acceptance of the gift, which can allow the gift really to be God, and can prevent the gift in its acceptance from being changed from God into a finite and created gift which only represents God, but is not God himself. In order to be able to accept God without reducing him, as it were, in this acceptance to our finiteness, this acceptance must be borne by God himself. God's self-communication as offer is also the necessary condition which makes its acceptance possible. (Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 128)

[83]Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 120.

[84]Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 118.

https://publications.lst.edu/

from himself, but can also at the same time communicate himself in his own reality without losing himself in that communication."[85]

If God's bestowal of self, then, is given not only as a gift but also as the necessary condition that renders possible the acceptance of the gift, then God's self-communication must be present in and available to *every* person because it is at the same time the very ground that makes man's acceptance of it possible. "God's offer of himself belongs to all men … and something … given prior to man's freedom as a task and as the condition of freedom's highest possibility."[86] However, it does not mean that because this grace of God's self-communication is offered to all, it is no longer gratuitous. Universality does not diminish the gratuitousness of grace. As Rahner laments: "Theology has been too long and too often bedeviled by the unavowed supposition that grace would be no longer grace if it were too generously distributed by the love of God!"[87] The grace of God's self-offer does not lose its supernaturality or gratuitousness and does not become "merited" and "natural" simply because it is present in *all* human beings as an existential condition of their actual existence, and "is present prior to their freedom, their self-understanding and their experience."[88] God's love, for Rahner, does not become less miraculous simply because it is given to all people at least in the mode of an offer. Therefore, "the statement that man as subject is the event of God's self-communication is a statement which refers to absolutely all men, and which expresses an existential of every person."[89] Viewed from this perspective, "everyone, really and radically every person must be understood as

[85]Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 121.

[86]Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 129. Indeed, "by making the offer of grace intrinsic to human existence, it makes it universal" (Dych, "Theology in a New Key," 14).

[87]Rahner, "Nature and Grace," 180.

[88]Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 127.

[89]Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 127.

https://publications.lst.edu/

the event of a supernatural self-communication of God, although not in the sense that every person necessarily accepts in freedom God's self-communication to man."[90]

[90]Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 127–128. According to Karen Kilby,

> [i]t is worth making clear that in speaking of a universal elevation of human nature, Rahner is not declaring that all are in a state of sanctifying grace and therefore justified. He wants to steer a delicate course, in fact, between maintaining that sanctifying grace is universally present, and everyone is in a state of grace (which would be to say too much), and maintaining that sanctifying grace is universally offered, but *given* only to those who accept the offer (which would be to say too little). His solution is to describe grace as universally present, but present as *offered*. It is, one might say, "there" in all of us, but we have a role in that we accept or reject it, and only if we accept it can we be said to be in a state of sanctifying grace, justified, saved. (Kilby, "Karl Rahner," 98)

For Galvin,

> the divine offer may be present in us in three different ways. First, it may be present simply as offer and appeal to human freedom, but as yet without personal response on our part. Even in this initial stage it has certain effects which transform the situation in which we exist. The two remaining forms presuppose our response. The offer may be present and accepted in an act which is both an event of grace and a deed of human freedom. The purpose of the divine offer is to achieve this result, which is often called the 'state of grace' in traditional terminology. But, finally, the offer may be present in rejection by our freedom. Yet, even in this instance, the offer does not vanish without a trace but remains, providing the possibility of forgiveness and involving the unrepentant sinner in a fundamental self-contradiction, since the God whom the sinner rejects is the One who offers fulfillment of the sinner's basic human longing. To guard against a possible misunderstanding, it must be stressed that neither acceptance nor rejection of the divine offer should be imagined as necessarily taking place in an explicit manner, nor as occurring in a single, clearly defined event which could be isolated from the rest of life and recognized as decisive upon subsequent reflection. (Galvin, "The Invitation of Grace," 69)

https://publications.lst.edu/

4.3 Man's Graced Existence Borne Out of the Supernatural Existential

In order to elucidate the free character of God's grace and its universal presence in all human beings, Rahner coined the expression the "supernatural existential," a language he partly borrowed from the philosopher Martin Heidegger.[91] For Heidegger, every human being possesses certain inalienable structures which he calls "existentials." An "existential," for Heidegger (and it is in this sense that Rahner, according to Conway, uses the term),[92] is "a permanent determination penetrating all elements of human existence, which reveals its meaning and structures, characterizing the human being before he engages in any action."[93] It refers to "a fundamental element in human existence, something which is a feature of all our experience rather than one object of our experience or one experience among others."[94] Simply put, it is a generic term applied to those fundamental, ontological characteristics

---

This grace, which, owing to God's universal salvific will, must be proffered to every man, is best understood not as merely an occasional, intermittent intervention of God, but more correctly as something which is permanently offered to a human being in his moral freedom. Thus the supernatural horizon of transcendence towards the God of grace stands permanently open for man as he is enveloped by God's salvific will taking concrete shape in the offer of grace. This proffered grace, which enables man adequately to accept the God who communicates himself in word and action, already contains in itself some kind of (inner, not public) revelation. Thus man lives within the range of God's salvific will revealing itself in the tender of grace. (K. Riesenhuber, "Afterword: The Anonymous Christian According to Karl Rahner," in A. Roper, *The Anonymous Christian* [New York: Sheed and Ward, 1966], 160. Henceforth referred to as "The Anonymous Christian According to Karl Rahner.")

[91]Cf. O'Donnell, *Life in the Spirit*, 23.

[92]Conway, *The Anonymous Christian—A Relativised Christianity?*, 14.

[93]M. Heidegger, *Being and Time* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), 44.

[94]Kilby, "Karl Rahner," 98.

https://publications.lst.edu/

or capacities of human existence which makes it specifically human and distinguishes it from other modes of existence.[95]

Rahner argues that human beings not only have natural existentials but also a supernatural one, hence a supernatural existential. The supernatural existential is the initial effect of the offer of grace, of the permeation of our entire existence by the gratuitous divine self-communication which is present even prior to human response to God's self-offer, and is operative everywhere and universally, and in fact makes human response possible. It is a fundamental structure of human life which is inescapably part of us, so primordially intrinsic to our existence that it is considered a permanent structure of human being.[96] "[It is] … 'supernatural' because it is the initial step in God's gratuitous self-communication, and [it is] … 'existential' because, abidingly present to all, it permeates the totality of life."[97] For Rahner, this supernatural existential is a result, a consequence of God's universal salvific will.[98] Since God wills all human beings to be saved, the effect of such a saving will is our being born into a human condition in which everyone is touched and permeated by God's grace, called to a supernatural destiny. Humanity is what it is because of its supernatural finality, and man lives always in creation in which grace is ubiquitous.

---

[95]Lawler and Salzman, "Karl Rahner and Human Nature," 390.

[96]A. E. Carr, "Starting with the Human," in L. J. O'Donovan, ed., *An Introduction to the Themes and Foundations of Karl Rahner's Theology* (New York: Seabury Press, 1980), 27.

[97]Duffy, "Experience of Grace," 46.

[98]Coffey, "The Whole Rahner," 96.

> The process begins with the universal saving will of God. This produces in each person the supernatural existential, which is the *beginning* of God's self-communication in grace. God then awaits our free decision of faith, which is at the same time the product of the permanent offer of grace and our own authentic act. This beginning of faith is fulfilled, partially in the grace of justification, and ultimately in the beatific vision. (Coffey, "The Whole Rahner," 109)

https://publications.lst.edu/

The supernatural existential, then, the initial disposition to graced union with God, which alone brings the completeness humans desire, is humanity's most intimate dimension, source and center of what human personhood is called to be.[99] The concept of supernatural existential points to the reality that in this world as it is known to us through faith and revelation, every human being exists in relation to the God who freely and gratuitously communicates his very self to humanity. The logical conclusion that can be drawn from the discussion of the supernatural existential element in every man, therefore, is that

> there is no such thing as the "natural" person, because everyone (not merely Christians) is graced with the offer of God's self-communication even prior to any human response. This means that there was never a time or a place in which God did not offer himself to all persons.[100]

While the concept of the supernatural existential resolves the extrinsicist problem of grace without compromising its freedom and gratuity, it does not solve the problem of the relationship of grace to nature.[101] To address this issue, Rahner draws on the traditional Scholastic idea of "obediential potency." "An obediential potency is a capacity which is open to fulfillment yet not frustrated or meaningless if the fulfillment is not granted."[102] Rahner regards our openness to being and our existence as spirit in world as obediential potency for the self-communication of God, as part of our nature as human being.

> If the divine self-communication did not occur, our openness toward being would still be meaningful as the condition for the possibility of human knowledge and human self-disposal in freedom. We would still have to do with God, though only as the distant horizon of our existence. But because of this same openness we are by nature possible recipients of God's self-communication, listeners for a possible divine

[99]Duffy, "Experience of Grace," 52.

[100]H. D. Egan, "Theology and Spirituality," in D. Marmion & M. E. Hines, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Rahner* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 16–17.

[101]Galvin, "The Invitation of Grace," 72.

[102]Galvin, "The Invitation of Grace," 72.

https://publications.lst.edu/

> word. While the actual offer of grace transforms our concrete existence, it does not destroy that which characterizes us specifically as human—our finite openness as spirit in world. And since the obediential potency for grace is precisely human nature as such, God's free fulfillment of this capacity through his self-gift automatically becomes the most central factor in human existence.[103]

Indeed, "should God not reveal himself, the openness of man for God's transcendence would still have a positive meaning: man would note the very silence of God, which is also a free action of his with respect to his creature, and thus a kind of communication."[104]

The supernatural existential, therefore, presupposes an obediential potency, yet an obediential potency that is no longer merely a non-repugnance of grace, but an absolute and transcendental orientation towards the absolute. With the help of these two concepts, Rahner is able to uphold the freedom of grace without making grace extrinsic to human life. Because of the supernatural existential, grace permeates the whole of human existence and is operative in everything that we do. Human nature, then, as unlimited openness to being, is obediential potency for the bestowal of grace: open and even oriented towards it, yet not absolutely demanding this highest fulfillment of its potency. Grace thus remains a free divine gift which, when freely given, takes its place at the very depth and core of human existence. Man, then, may be

> free to accept or reject God's gracious self-offer, but the supernatural existential, being a permanent disposition or determination of his ontological state, continues to exercise an influence which implies that the human being must adopt a stance which is ultimately for or against God.[105]

---

[103]Galvin, "The Invitation of Grace," 72. In Rahner's *Hearer of the Word*, he asserts that as "spirits," "we have an open ear for every word that may proceed from the mouth of the eternal" (Rahner, *Hearer of the Word*, 54).

[104]Riesenhuber, "The Anonymous Christian According to Karl Rahner," 158.

[105]Conway, *The Anonymous Christian—A Relativised Christianity?*, 14.

> The supernatural "existential" cannot be refused by man; it is given to him, whether he accepts or rejects the gift of grace, along with

https://publications.lst.edu/

If man decides to go against God, then he is also going against his own ontological state.

5. Conclusion

The horizon of the human spirit is transformed by the supernatural existential borne out of God's universal saving will. As a result, human intellect and will, the way we see and experience ourselves, the world and God, has been transformed by God's supernatural grace. Hence, we can and do experience, albeit often only in an indirect and hidden way, grace itself, or God himself. It is, nevertheless, experienced, unthematically, pre-reflexively, preconceptually. That is why, when asked about their experience of grace, people may truthfully deny that they have such an experience, because they may be—as Rahner formulated the controversial expression—"anonymous Christians." "[This] means in principle that the original experience of God even in his self-communication can be so universal, so unthematic and so 'unreligious' that it takes place, unnamed but really, wherever we are living out our existence."[106]

The supernatural grace which is God himself dwelling at the very core of man's existence, for Rahner, is bestowed in the mode of an offer which is not extrinsic to man but determines him to such an extent that it continues to determine his existence even when he rejects it. It is always present to every human as an offer that precedes every act and decision made by man in all his knowledge and freedom. As an offer made by God arising from his will to save all men, this supernatural existential is a concrete human reality, so that every human person is ontologically directed and dynamically oriented towards God, and this finalization

---

his nature. Inasmuch as man's whole nature is permeated by it and culminates in it, the person who rejects his supernatural vocation stands with his whole being in the shadow of doom and is unable to keep any remnant of his nature sound and unscathed. (Riesenhuber, "The Anonymous Christian According to Karl Rahner," 159.)

[106]Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 132.

https://publications.lst.edu/

happens in the inmost depths of his being, something that no man, even if he rejects the offer or is guilty of sin, can escape from.

Since God calls all human beings to a supernatural end, human existence is other than it might have been without that divine call. God's offer of grace, which is himself, is present all throughout our life, transforming our consciousness. Since all our human acts which engage the depth of our freedom have an effect in our relationship with God, acceptance or rejection of grace takes place not just when we perform "religious" acts.[107] It occurs every time we truly exercise our human freedom, even if the act seems to have nothing to do with God. Echoing Rahner's thought, Egan could only say, and rightly so: "[That] God is in fact with us, we have no choice. One may be able freely to say no to God with one's entire being, but one can never separate oneself from God's self-communication."[108] In Rahner's own beautiful words: "It is both terrible and comforting to dwell in the inconceivable nearness of God, and so to be loved by God that the first and last gift is infinity and inconceivability itself. But we have no choice. God is with us."[109]

---

[107]Rahner explains that

> [the] experience we are appealing to here is not primarily and ultimately the experience which a person has when he decides to explicitly and in a deliberate and responsible way upon some *religious* activity, for example, prayer, a cultic act, or a reflective and theoretical occupation with religious themes … [but] rather the experience which is given to every person prior to such reflexive religious activity and decisions, and perhaps in a form … which seemingly are not religious at all. (Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 132)

[108]Egan, "Theology and Spirituality," 17.

[109]K. Rahner, *Prayers for a Lifetime* (New York: Crossroad, 1984), 3.

https://publications.lst.edu/