

Comparative Theology

Engaging Particularities Conference Papers

Boston College

Year 2006

Revisiting Karl Rahner's "Anonymous
Christian": Towards a Christian
Theology of the Religions grounded in
the Kenotic Ethic of Imitatio Christi

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ENGAGING PARTICULARITIES 2006:

*New Directions in Comparative Theology, Inter-religious Dialogue,
Theology of Religions and Missiology Conference*

Revisiting Karl Rahner's "Anonymous Christian":

**Towards a Christian Theology of the Religions
grounded in the Kenotic Ethic of *Imitatio Christi***

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February 1, 2006

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It is perhaps often forgotten that Karl Rahner's symbolic¹ presentation of the "anonymous Christian"² is not a mere afterthought, or an addendum to an already majestic edifice of theological scholarship, but a necessary conclusion, a vital insight, dependent upon his elaborate anthropology, Christology, Trinitarian theology, and of course his soteriology. With his indebtedness to the tradition, Rahner finds the seed of his own theological reflection in the essential reality of relationship: the relationship between divine and human, a relationship through which humanity is called to divinization. Rahner understands this relationship as being completely dependent on God's initiative, who throughout salvation history has sought to reveal Godself to God's people. As Vorgrimler points out: "'God's self-communication' is perhaps the central idea of Rahner's theology"³—a theology that recognizes the silent presence of the Spirit creating and recreating the cosmos, as well as the loud and clear divine proclamation in the Word made flesh. The incarnation, God becoming human, is for Rahner, the "unsurpassability"⁴ of God's self-revelation, and what enables him to suggest that "the immanent trinity is the economic trinity and vice-versa." God who is revealed to us in the Word made flesh, the truth manifested to us about Father, Son and Holy Spirit in the Word's dwelling among us, is the truth about God in Godself because God's self-revelation is generous and genuine.

Yet Rahner also emphasizes that if God constantly desires to communicate with God's people, God has also offered humanity the means to receive God's revelation. Just like the Greek Fathers, Rahner embraces the important insight that to be human is to carry the seed of divinity—a seed that recognizes

¹ I wish to emphasize that the term "anonymous Christian," just like all terms in Rahner's theology is symbolic, which means that it reveals just as much as it conceals. It hints at the truth without ever extinguishing it. I make this claim based on Rahner's own interest in the theology of symbol as shown in his article that bears the same name: Karl Rahner, "The Theology of the Symbol," *Theological Investigations (TI)* vol. 4 (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1966), 221-252. For an analysis of Rahner's Christology as Symbol see George Vass, *A Pattern of Doctrines: Part I - God and Christ. Understanding Karl Rahner*, vol. 3. (London: Sheed and Ward, 1996), 105-111.

² See: Rahner, "Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions," *TI* vol. 5, (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1966), 115-134; "Anonymous Christians," *TI* vol.6 (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1969), 390-39; "Anonymous Christianity and the Missionary Task of the Church," *TI* vol.12 (New York: Crossroad, 1974), 161-178; "Observations on the Problem of the 'Anonymous Christian,'" *TI* vol.14 (New York: Crossroad, 1979), 280-294; "Jesus Christ in the non-Christian Religions," *TI* vol.17 (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 39-50; "Christianity's Absolute Claim," *TI* vol. 21 (New York: Crossroad, 1988), 171-184.

³ Herbert Vorgrimler, *Karl Rahner: His Life, Thought and Works* (Montreal: Palm Publishers, 1965), 82.

⁴ Rahner, "The Death of Jesus and the Closure of Revelation," *TI* vol. 18, (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 134.

God and is oriented towards God. For Rahner the seed of divinity is the “supernatural existential”⁵ that constantly pushes us beyond the boundaries of our selfhood to reach the other, and ultimately to transcend our humanity and embrace the divine Other. To be human is to be constantly seeking the divine, and hence to have the right “antennae” to receive God’s communication. The spirit/Spirit within us longs for the Spirit outside of us, because it is the same Holy Spirit: uncreated, divine, seeking our conversion for “our restless hearts” to rest in God. Our “restlessness” is a clear sign of our “searching,”⁶ of our seeking the one who fulfils our desire for transcendence. The one who can fulfil our desire “absolutely” is the “absolute bringer of salvation;”⁷ the one who embodies the unsurpassability of divine revelation; the very Icon of God, who reveals to humanity what our finality as divinized men and women can be.

This finality is to become “God-(Hu)man”—divinized—and this eschatological invitation of the coming together of the two natures, human and divine, with no confusion, is actualized in time in the Christ—the one on whom the Holy Spirit rests from eternity, who shares the Spirit with the Father, but who chose in freedom to penetrate irrevocably the created realm and become flesh. Encountering the Saviour, the perfect Model of humanity, is thus to truly encounter who I am called to become as a human person. Indeed, to share in the Christ’s Spirit (the Messiah, who is the Anointed by God’s Spirit, the one on whom the Spirit rests) is to become so full of God’s Spirit, that Rahner dares to call the elevation of our “supernatural existential” to our human *theosis*, a “hypostatic union”⁸—distinguished from the “Hypostatic Union” of the Incarnate God, by the Saviour being “our pledge, and we ourselves are not the

⁵ Among the numerous articles by Rahner that focus specifically on the supernatural existential, see: “Anonymous and Explicit Faith,” *TI* vol.16 (New York: Crossroad, 1979), 52-59; “Observations on the Problem of Anonymous Christian,” 280-294; “Anonymous Christianity and the Missionary Task of the Church,” 161-178; “Anonymous Christians,” 390-398.

⁶ Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, translated by William V. Dych, (New York: Crossroad, 1999), 318.

⁷ Karl Rahner, “Jesus Christ in the Non-Christian Religions,” 47-49; “What does it mean today to believe in Jesus Christ?” *TI* vol. 18, (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 145-146; “Jesus Christ and Christology,” part 1 in *A New Christology* by Karl Rahner and Wilhelm Thüsing, (New York: Crossroad, 1980), 7.

⁸ Rahner writes: “Whenever God – by his absolute self-communication—brings about man’s self-transcendence into God, in such a way that both these factors form the irrevocable promise made to all men which has already reached its consummation in this man, there we have a hypostatic union.” In: “Christology Within an Evolutionary View of the World,” *TI* vol. 5, (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1966), 182.

pledge but the recipients of God's pledge to us."⁹

This is, in a nutshell, the theological structure that leads Rahner to his claim that because God desires to communicate with all, and indeed in our humanity we are all blessed with the desire to seek transcendence and to become "like God," many of us receive this gift of encountering the divine, and hence of receiving Christ's Spirit, in hiddenness, without formally proclaiming Jesus as Saviour, and without formally receiving the baptism that marks us as "Christians"—as sharing in the Christ's Spirit of divinization. Rahner calls these numerous men and women who are desirous of "God," and receive and embrace the gift of God's self-communication—even if only in the hiddenness of their hearts—"anonymous Christians." They can be religious others, committed to various religious paths; they can be secular others, claiming no overt allegiance to any religion; but they must be desirous of authentic transcendence, walking on a spiritual path, seeking the divine Spirit of holiness.

Consequently, with his claim of "anonymous Christianity," Rahner stresses not only that there is one Saviour, one unsurpassable revelation of God, one Christ, but also that the power of this one Saviour is universal:

God our Saviour ... desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself human, who gave himself a ransom for all – this was attested at the right time. (1Tim 2:3b-6)¹⁰

The Spirit of Christ thus penetrates all of humanity, seeking everyone's rebirth "from above" (Jn 3:3) that is not of the flesh (or of creeds alone) but of "water and Spirit" (Jn 3:5). Rahner's second claim is thus that the encounter with the Christ, the gift of the Spirit, does not only happen face-to-face, within the bosom of the known "body of Christ," but also in the unknown, in the anonymous "body"—the body that extends to those whom the Spirit of Christ chooses freely: "The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit" (Jn 3:8). These are the ones whom the Spirit carries along mysterious paths of

⁹ Ibid., 183.

¹⁰ All scriptural quotations are from the NRS version.

salvation, revealing the Christ in hiddenness. As Jesus proclaims through the words of the Fourth Evangelist: “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd” (Jn 10:16)—and one family of God.

It is perhaps just as worth noting, however, that together with his claims for God’s universal salvific will, Rahner, together with the tradition, also makes the contrary claim that ecclesial baptism and paying lip service to being a “Christian” is not enough to truly receive God’s Gift of salvation. While it is a greater good to recognize the Christ explicitly and not only implicitly, to become a member of the body of Christ through baptism and not only anonymously, water baptism without *metanoia* and an authentic desire to become like Christ is insufficient for our transformation to become children of God. In Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritan woman, the one who represents the religious other and even the rejected other, the Evangelist proclaims through Jesus’ lips:

Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth. (Jn 4:21-24)

To worship in “spirit and truth” is to worship in the same nature as God’s; it is to participate in God’s divine nature that is revealed to be love. God is Spirit, “God is love,” (1 Jn 4:8) and in our Spirit-filled worship, in our love-filled worship, the spirit/Spirit within us reaches the Spirit that transcends us to transform our hearts to “flesh.” As Ezekiel in the Hebrew Scriptures proclaims:

I will give them one heart, and put a new spirit within them; I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, so that they may follow my statutes and keep my ordinances and obey them. Then they shall be my people, and I will be their God. (Ez 11:19-20)

The gracious receiving of God’s Spirit is thus a radical transformation that enables humanity to follow God’s statutes—to keep the covenantal promises that bind God’s people to Godself. In the words of Rabbi Hillel the Elder and even of Rabbi Saul (the Apostle Paul), these statutes, “the whole (Mosaic) law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself’” (Gal 5:14); or “That which is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbour. That is the whole Torah; the rest is the

explanation” (Babylonian Talmud, tractate Shabbat 31a).

The entire law, what binds humanity to God, the symbol of human divinization, is summarized in one’s relationship with one’s neighbour—the neighbour that in the Hebrew tradition extends to the “stranger”: “You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt” (Deut 10:19); and who in Jesus’ teachings also embraces the enemy: “But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Mt 5:44). In Luke’s gospel we have an even more interesting twist: this law of love is shown to be received and upheld with joy, not only by those who are formally within the covenant (the Jews, or from our inter-faith context, the “Christians”) but also by the religious other. Indeed in Luke’s narrative (10:29-36) it is the Samaritan, the religious other, who is raised as the model of neighbourly love, since he is the one who acts with justice and mercy towards the Jew who needed his kindness.

This criterion of justice and mercy is thus the fulcrum of the argument behind Jesus’ claim that there are two great commandments: love of God and love of neighbour (Mk 12:29-31, Mt 22: 37-40, Lk 10:27). Not only is the law, the complete love of God with all our mind, heart and soul, expressed in our concrete and tangible love of neighbour in an ethical praxis of justice, but the very love of neighbour, the acting in justice and mercy, transforms humanity into the very likeness of God, and hence enables us to love God with the same love that the divine generously bestows on us first. As Luke summarizes our human divinization: “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful” (6:36), while for Matthew to “be perfect... as your heavenly Father is perfect” (5:48) is “to sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven” (19:21).

This biblical premise is thus the ground that sustains Rahner’s ethical claim in his controversial essay “Reflections on the Unity of the Love of Neighbour and the Love of God,” where Rahner argues that, “The act of personal love for another human being is therefore the all-embracing basic act of [the human] which gives meaning, direction and measure to everything else.”¹¹ The way how we show love to

¹¹ Rahner, “Reflections on the Unity of the Love of Neighbour and the Love of God,” *TI* vol. 6, (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1969), 241

our neighbour is the criterion for our authentic worship in “Spirit and truth”—it is the criterion that reveals that God’s Spirit truly indwells in our hearts and we are God’s chosen ones. “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven” (Mt 7:21). The criterion of right relationship (*orthopraxis*) is thus revealed as the criterion to inform *orthodoxy* (right praise); while the criterion of proclamation, of professing in the Spirit that “Jesus is Lord,” (1 Cor 12:3) flows from the same Spirit that transforms us into children of God, in our becoming like God, through our neighbourly love. Proclamation must go hand in hand with our praxis and not contradict it. Likewise, the one who is blessed with acting like God, who is blessed with God’s Spirit, will not deny “Christ,” even if their “Christianity” remains “anonymous.” Gandhi famously expressed this truth by saying: “I like your Christ”—even if he proceeded to challenge baptized Christians by qualifying, “I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ.”

This is of course the crux of the argument that leads me to suggest that Rahner’s theology of the “anonymous Christian” is symbolic language that can perhaps be interpreted most adequately and in a life-giving way, within the framework of a theology of *imitatio Christi*, of a theology of discipleship. Gandhi presents a radical test to the baptized Christian, a challenge that we ought to take with the utmost seriousness, because Gandhi’s actions for peace and liberation of the oppressed have revealed with dazzling clarity his personal holiness—a holiness that the Christian must proclaim comes from the Spirit of God; a holiness that Gandhi himself recognized as being inspired, partially at least, by the holiness of Christ. This holiness, however, Gandhi found chillingly absent in many of those who claim to share in Christ’s Spirit.

This raises the central question pertinent to our discussion: how do we, all human beings, encounter the Christ in our lives—especially if the Christ is not always clearly mediated to us by our churches (whether we are “baptized” Christians or not)? Is there an “anonymous Christ” who encounters the “anonymous Christian” bestowing onto them the baptism in the Spirit to become like Christ—even if implicitly? How does the baptized Christian, the one called by the Master to be his disciple, proclaim Christ to all, so that Christ may be authentically encountered, and his Spirit shared for the salvation of all?

Rahner helps us shed some light on these questions. He identifies that:

[W]herever salvation occurs in the individual's salvation-history, it also mediates salvation for all others. ... [E]very person who abides in faith and love is in this relationship because of all the other people, since each person is intended by God to be an 'element' – even though a unique and irreplaceable element – of the single salvation-history.¹²

For Rahner anybody who is truly “of God” cannot but proclaim through their actions, through their becoming, the joy of the Spirit. Anybody who truly shares in Christ's Spirit cannot but share in turn the Spirit of the Messiah with others. Yet how can this be so?

René Girard's anthropology¹³ can perhaps assist us to solve this dilemma. In Girard's literary studies he discovered a basic pattern of human becoming that is reflected not only in the religious literature of most world religions, but also in Rahner's theology. This is the inherent nature of humanity as relational: in Girard's words, to be an individual is a misnomer. We are rather “interdividuals”¹⁴—our human identity, our human becoming, our very self, totally constructed from our encounter with the other. The foundation for this absolute need for the other is that we are created with a “desire”—an amorphous desire—that constantly hungers to take form. Our desire therefore, pushes us outside of ourselves to imitate the desire of the other, in order that we can satisfy—partially or momentarily—our intense “restlessness” to fulfill our desire. This imitation of the other's desire is what Girard calls “triangular mimesis”: we desire an object, whether it is a physical object, or wealth, success, power, or even beauty, goodness and joy, not because we truly desire the “object” in itself, but because we imitate the other, the model, who already has it, or else desires it. Unconsciously or not, we desire to become like the model. We desire to become a “somebody,” because we recognize our inherent emptiness or formlessness of being. We desire to be shown a way of becoming.

It is easy to conclude from this brief description of mimetic desire, however, that often the closer

¹² Rahner, “One Mediator and Many Mediations,” *TI* vol. 9, (New York: Herder & Herder, 1972), 181.

¹³ For a summary of Girard's thought see, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, trans. James G. Williams (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 2004).

¹⁴ René Girard, “Interdividual Psychology” in *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, trans. Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1987), 283-431.

we are to the model the more we compete for the same object, and the greater the risk of conflict and violence. This is simply because behind the conflict and violence, the two caught up in rivalry become mirror-images of each other—become Narcissus and his reflection, caught up in the *narcosis* that blinds both to the truth that they have become one destructive force of distorted desire that seeks to destroy both. The process that halts (at least temporarily) this total annihilation is the projection of violence itself onto the innocent other: the scapegoat who is brutally “murdered” by the mob, and thus paradoxically becomes the “saviour;” the one who by saving the mob from its own total self-annihilation becomes “sacralised.”¹⁵

Most of Girard’s corpus analyzes in depth the intricacy of distorted desire that theologians like James Alison have recognized as being a valid symbolic reinterpretation of the Augustinian notion of “original sin”¹⁶—the sin of distorted desire, and hence of the break-up of relationship that in Eden is recognized as the human separation from God, from the human other, and from creation itself. Yet Girard also attempts to present the hope that the cycle of distorted desire has been broken once and for all in the final Scapegoat who in his violent death has revealed the absurdity of mimetic violence. This Scapegoat who frees humanity from creating scapegoats is, for Girard, the Christ whose death and resurrection have revealed an alternate pattern of relating, and—even more crucially—of desiring.

The Christ is thus presented as not only the Word of God who becomes flesh, but as the Word who takes flesh in obedience to the Father. This obedience is so complete that Christ empties himself of his divinity to dwell among us—indeed even to suffer a horrific death on the cross (Phil 2:7-8). Christ’s earthly existence, an Image of his divine procession, is revealed as totally oriented towards the Father; Jesus is revealed as totally directed by his desire for the Father that enables him to love unconditionally just like the Father. Just as the Father emptied himself in the eternal procession of the Son, so the Son empties himself in his mutual love for the Father, the Spirit; and the “One” overflowing love of the Three,

¹⁵ Although the symbol of the victim as scapegoat permeates Girard’s work a detailed study of notion, of course, is found in his work entitled *The Scapegoat*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore, Maryland: John Hopkins University Press, 1989). See also: René Girard, “Python and his Two Wives: An Exemplary Scapegoat Myth” in *The Girard Reader*, ed. James G. Williams (New York: Crossroad, 2004), 118-141.

¹⁶ Ronald A. Mercier, “What are we to make of sin? Alison’s challenge to moral theology,” *Josephinum Journal of Theology*, 10(2): 271-284.

is poured out kenotically to create, and as the hope for recreation inaugurated by the Son's self-emptying to become human, thus enabling all flesh to become divinized with the Father's Spirit. The Word-Son, as Rahner stresses, is thus the unsurpassable revelation of the kenotic love of the Triune God: Jesus Christ is the one who in his flesh, in his death, in his resurrection, reveals once and for all God's being as self-emptying love. Jesus the Christ is thus the Model for our human becoming, the one who is God-(Hu)man, because he reveals to humanity how to love kenotically, in the way that God has loved us first. In Rahner's own words: "The existence of the God-[Hu]man within the single totality of [human]kind makes possible absolute love to another person."¹⁷

The importance of this dynamic of *imitatio Christi*, of a theology of discipleship, can perhaps be exposed even more sharply by reflecting on the commandment of love as taught in the Fourth Gospel:

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another. (Jn 13:34-35)

Unlike Paul and the other evangelists, John stresses that the "Christian" is not primarily called to be a "messenger," an *apostolos*, but rather a "disciple," a *matetes*—indeed a "beloved disciple" and a "friend" (Jn 15:15). The disciple is the one who in all their actions and thoughts imitates the Model to become just like the Model. The disciple is the one who becomes a "messenger," proclaiming the Good News, through their becoming "witnesses," revealers, "martyrs" of the Model. The Good News is revealed through their being its bearers in the flesh, just as Christ was the bearer in the flesh of the Spirit, who inaugurates the rule of God on earth, the kingdom of justice and mercy.

In the Fourth Gospel the commandment of love is thus simultaneously a commandment of imitation: of imitating the Christ who is the perfect Image of divine love in his being God incarnate. This divine Icon however, Jesus the Nazarene, is also the one who breaks open in his flesh what divine love is truly like: a total self-offering, a complete generous other-centeredness, because it is a free surrender in obedience to his radical desire for the Father. Thus the Christ reveals to humanity that our desire also

¹⁷ Karl Rahner, "The One Christ and the Universality of Salvation," *TI* vol. 16, (New York: Crossroad, 1979), 223.

ought to be directed to the Father, the ultimate *arche* of all transcendence, the One who in-forms (gives ultimate form) to our human desire. Our “supernatural existential” planted as seed within us, finds its flourishing in the True Light who is its authentic Source. Our *theosis* is thus radically Trinitarian: we become divinized, images of the Image of God, in receiving Christ’s Spirit, through our imitation of Christ’s kenotic love, that orients our desire to the Father—the absolute Other whom our heart longs for, and for whom creation groans in its eschatological awaiting “so that God may be all in all” (1 Cor15:28).

Consequently, in Christ’s revelation of Trinitarian *perichoresis* humanity is invited to truly imitate the divine’s love and become a human communion in imitation of God’s own Triune *koinonia*. The Christian Good News ultimately reveals that the ones who are favoured by God are those who embrace with trust the Gift of God’s Spirit who in the Christ event was poured lavishly on all flesh (Joel 2:28; Acts 2:16-18). The Good News is that in Christ’s Spirit we are invited to a transcendence that invites us to an authentic human community—a community that cannot recognize anyone as “other,” but that embraces all as unique children of God.

The fruits of our imitation of Christ, of our authentic friendship in the Spirit, reveal how anyone who has truly received God’s Spirit—baptized and anonymous Christian—is an image of Christ for others, a medium through whom the message of Christ’s Good News of salvation in the Spirit, is made manifest and flourishes. The anonymous Christian receives Christ through “anonymous christs” who in their *praxis* and *poesis*, live as imitators of Christ by sharing in his Spirit. Their sharing of the Good News is revealed as generous, merciful and transparent if their desire is truly oriented toward the Father in imitation of Christ’s desire—an eschatological orientation that dawns the promised fulfilment of recreation. The “anonymous Christian,” as the one who imitates the “anonymous Christ,” allows not only for an authentic Christian theology of the religions that proclaims Christ as the unique universal Saviour, but also for Christ’s salvation to be bestowed in different ways, through various paths, by being revealed in the unique holy lives of all children of God.