KARL RAHNER’S UNDERSTANDING OF THE DYNAMIC OF CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

by

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Karl Rahner’s theology proposes that while human existence is characterized by plural and multivalent expressions of revealed truth, it remains primarily and ultimately oriented towards the one, single mystery who is God. Rahner explores this proposition by appreciating God as Holy Mystery and human beings as persons who know God as infinite and intimate. This approach can provide contemporary persons an intellectually-honest account of both revealed truth and the historicity of our experience and expression of that truth. Such expressions are never exhaustive because God as Holy Mystery cannot be exhausted in human concepts, reflections or expressions. Further, humans can really express revealed truth, even though their apprehension and expression of that truth is historically conditioned. For Rahner, this is assured because human beings are made by, guided by, and directed towards the incomprehensible mystery as the very fulfillment of their humanity, i.e., as the source of salvation.
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In every age, human persons have sought to articulate their deepest, most primordial questions about themselves and their relationship to the world. This is particularly pertinent to the question of the relationship between revealed truth and the process of human knowing. The consideration of revealed truth is particularly urgent, given today’s climate of post-modernism,¹ which questions the very notion of a universal truth that might be binding upon human persons. In this post-modern climate, Christianity stands as a historical religion committed to the conviction that revealed truth is incarnate in the world of human beings and is truly knowable, not simply despite human history, but precisely in and through human existence. The question arises: is there an intellectually honest way to account for human experience of historicity and Christianity’s claim about revealed truth.

Contemporary persons are challenged to appropriate and to proclaim revealed truth, that is, the message of Jesus Christ—unchanged yesterday, today, and for ever²—in “many and various ways”³ according to the historical context in which they find themselves. Today, when post-modern consciousness pervades our North American context, it is difficult for the contemporary person to imagine that there can be an idea, concept or thought system which can

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¹While this thesis does not directly consider post-modernism, this thesis is an example of the context of post-modernism consciousness, which takes seriously subjective consciousness.


³Heb 1:1
integrate the many, and often contrasting, expressions of revealed truth into one consistent account.\textsuperscript{4} Today, theology must be able to account for revealed truth when we are aware, now more than ever, that our historical context conditions how we think, how we articulate things, and how we come to know and to speak of truth, and, ultimately, of God.

Many theologians in the past few decades have addressed themselves to the impact of historical consciousness upon the experience and articulation of the Christian tradition, especially to reflection upon the relationship between human existence and absolute being who has been named God. The struggle to articulate the relationship between the self-consistency of God, human experience, and articulation of that experience of God in diverse historical contexts pervades the entire corpus of Karl Rahner’s work. Rahner’s conviction was that human beings can know God through God’s self-communication to human beings. Rahner devoted his life to exploring and to modeling what he proposed to be an intellectually honest way to approach this conviction. This model offered an account of the context of human history marked by pluralistic approaches to the meaning of human life.

That human apprehension and expression of revealed truth is historically conditioned—but, nonetheless, possible—can be difficult to understand, because of the metaphysical model which has deeply affected our philosophical and religious systems, as well as because of the widespread relativism within Western cultures. In short, Rahner held that Catholic theology lacked an intellectually honest model by which persons could integrate the historicity of human existence and the dynamic orientation of human being towards knowing truth, which is ultimately an orientation to God, the first truth. How is it, Rahner asks, that a contemporary

person can unabashedly proclaim that there is continuity in expressions of revealed truth even as those expressions are rooted within constantly changing historical contexts? In the Christian context, this question becomes: how can the unchanging message of the ministry, cross, and resurrection of a first-century Jewish man from Nazareth be communicated authentically in the context of today? The particular focus of this thesis is the dynamic between continuity and change within human expressions of revealed truth.

The goal of this thesis is, therefore, to synthesize what Rahner calls an intellectually honest account of this dynamic of continuity and change. His account addresses the Holy Mystery who is God as the one referent of the contemporary person's experience of the plurality of expressions of revealed truth. Rahner recognizes that the contemporary person is well aware of human nature as historically conditioned, but also that "there is an unwillingness confidently to accept one's own real and personal history (Geschichte) as the basis for deciding one's existence. There is an idea that it is impossible to establish any absolute truth for those who remain within history and are involved in it. But history itself demands this because truth does de facto arise in history, and without it there would be no history in the true sense at all."5 Christianity itself can seem to complicate further this situation by its many and varied faith statements which can cloud their underlying continuity.

It is not easy because Christianity, at first sight, consists of such a wealth of statements, dogmatic and moral assertions and ecclesiastical directives that it is all too easy to fail to 'see the wood for the trees'. It is all too easy for man to gain the impression that an assessment of this sort, into which so many individual factors enter (all of which, however, must be accepted in globo) would inevitably entail far too many possibilities of error for one to commit one's self to it with a good conscience.6


6Ibid., 59. While I am committed to using language which is inclusive, the direct quotations from Rahner's
Rahner addresses the contemporary person's experience of historicity and the plurality of expressions of revealed truth by pointing to a constitutive element of human being, namely, the self-communication of God as both infinite horizon and intimacy. This constitutive element of human being underlies the human person's experience of Holy Mystery; it is primordial to human existence and, therefore, to all experience, knowledge, and activity of human being. This primordial experience is not one characteristic of human being amidst others; rather, Rahner says that it is the basis for and pervades human existence. Human beings are fundamentally persons who have been taken hold of by the incomprehensible mystery of God.

Rahner's theology, then, presents a way for the contemporary person to understand the plurality and historicity of expressions of revealed truth, especially Christian faith statements, by considering the absolute truth which is the "original and indefinable mystery" and by considering what it means for humans to be both transcendent and finite. The first consideration addresses God as Holy Mystery, the infinite horizon to which human beings are oriented. God is always incomprehensible mystery in relationship to human beings—in this life and in the *visio beatifica*. The second consideration addresses the context of human living and how it is that human nature is both rooted in history and oriented to absolute truth, i.e., Holy Mystery. The ultimately incomprehensible mystery to which human beings are oriented, precisely because they are human, is not some impersonal goal devoid of meaning, but a personal God who approaches human beings in Love through the very context and material of human living.

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texts will be rendered in their English translated form but without further note in order to prevent obtrusive or incorrect formulae. In many cases where the English word "man" is used, the German word from which it was translated is "Mensch" which can also mean human being or person.

7 Ibid., 65.
This thesis explores these two considerations. Its purpose is to set out Rahner’s conviction that it is indeed possible to establish revealed truth for those who remain within history. He affirms that all the numerous ‘truths’, which various faith statements proclaim, truly participate in the one truth that is God, the Holy Mystery. “Rightly regarded Christianity is not a fortress of truth with innumerable windows, which we must live in in order to be ‘in the truth’, but rather one single aperture which leads out of all the individual truths (and even errors) into the truth which is the unique incomprehensibility of God.” Thus, the multiplicity of faith statements is not meant to be confusing or random or unrelated; rather, the multiplicity is a sign of the inexhaustible ways that human beings experience and express the incomprehensibility of God. Rahner’s account of the development of dogma elucidates his conclusion regarding God as Holy Mystery and human living as transcendent and finite. Dogmatic statements are an important type of faith expression; access, appreciation and assent to them today demand an approach that acknowledges both the historicity and the continuity of our experience and articulation of the Holy Mystery.

This introduction sets out a brief presentation of Rahner’s assumptions and general theology of mystery, his notion of the dynamic of continuity and change within human existence, and the procedure to be followed in this thesis.

*Karl Rahner*—Karl Rahner made it his life’s work to reflect critically and faithfully on the activity of God in the world and the human response to God. For Rahner, it was a crucial task to be able to articulate the message of the Gospel in and through the lived experience of all human beings. 

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8Ibid., 61.
beings. Early in his work, Rahner recognized that we can no longer speak of revealed truth as a permanent or continuous element of human existence without also speaking of historicity and temporality, i.e., the changing elements of human existence. Rahner’s theology is a delicate balance of these two elements of continuity and change; this balance is more properly termed a ‘dynamic’, because these elements are in relationship to one another: they are neither opposed to one another nor conflated into one another. In other words, Rahner’s task is to demonstrate that truth can be apprehended by human persons through an appreciation of God as Holy Mystery and of human existence precisely as openness to the infinity of this Holy Mystery.

This way of doing theology was a challenging task for Rahner, because many theologians, indeed, the magisterium of the Church, were firmly rooted in a classicist mindset, i.e., a particular scientific or philosophical method which apprehended reality abstractly, to the exclusion of concrete lived experience. This mindset was given its distinctively Catholic form through some interpretations of the work of Thomas Aquinas. For many within the Church, such interpretations of Aquinas’ theology became the de facto mouthpiece of the Roman Catholic tradition, even when these categories of thought began to be surpassed by more commonly received conceptions of what it means to be a human being in the presence of the Holy Mystery.

Rahner’s task, then, was to demonstrate a solid command of classicist language, concepts and argumentation—particularly how it was combined with Thomistic theology—and then to use these to move its proponents into an alternative way of thinking. What led Rahner and many others to this alternative interpretation is known philosophically as the turn to the subject, i.e.,

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the turn to a more rigorous account of the individual subject’s apprehension of the truth. Concomitant with this turn was the modern age’s focus on history from which emerged the recognition of historicity and historical consciousness. Such new reflections could not be easily reconciled within the schema of classicism. Thus, the serious acknowledgment of the subjective consciousness of individuals and of the data of the historical sciences was considered threatening and, often, anathema, particularly when such a profound regard for historicity was brought to bear upon the meaning of tradition and the articulation of the faith.

Rahner’s focus on the subject who is encountered by God opens up his theology to consideration of how it is that one’s historical context gives rise to knowing God and knowing revealed truth. From this perspective, every event of human living has the potential, not only to speak a word about God, but truly to meet God, for God is a priori the basis of human being. Rahner uses the notion of mystery in order to explore what it means to be human. In its most profound, theological sense, mystery is the name given to the God in whom we live and move and have our being, and who is in constant relationship to us at every moment of history. Whether someone is scrubbing mud off her child in a Haitian stream or chanting the psalms of morning prayer, God is present with the eternal offer to immerse oneself into the folds of the mystery of God.

The relationship between the permanence of truth and the historicity of our understanding of truth is a basic challenge in theology and philosophy alike. Because of the turn to the

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10See Chapter Two for a further exploration of the turn to the subject.

subject, the concept of historicity—humans are set in time and conditioned by the context in which they live—is relatively recent as a focus of reflection. The reality it indicates, however, has been operative throughout history, even though it has not been directly considered in the form now commonly assumed. As part of our explicit reflection now, this concept of historicity provides an opportunity to understand traditional and contemporary experiences in a new light. The whole of the Rahnerian corpus is in some way an engagement of this reflection.

In terms of theological method, Rahner understands the task of theology to be reductio in mysterium (being led back into mystery). Rahner says that the theology of mystery is not just a special subject area in theology. He offers a general warning to theologians that they not engage in illusions by failing to account for the mystery which encompasses what they are doing.\(^1\) Rahner does not want the contemporary person to think of theology as “a mere interweaving of ideas which are, of their nature, incapable of verification, which remain at the level of poetical concepts and can still be upheld, at most, simply by pointing with a certain arbitrariness to those dark and subconscious levels in man which have not yet been illumined by the anthropological sciences ...”\(^2\) Rather, Rahner understands theology to be a critical and yet faithful reflection upon humanity’s encounter with the Holy Mystery who has acted throughout history and continues to act in each new age. The paradigm that Rahner sets for himself within theology appears also to be a paradigm for shaping our very lives: to emerge out of a grounding in and deep love for the mystery of God in all things. That is, Rahner begins by making the fiducial faith statement that God is, and further, that this God is also Holy Mystery. These trusting faith


\(^2\)Ibid., 101-102.
statements are intimately bound to how truth is to be understood in human living. To not grasp these givens would constitute a gross misunderstanding of Rahner's theology.

*Continuity and Change*—The terms, continuity and change, constitute a synthetic way of naming the dynamic between the ongoing communication of God within human existence and the human appropriation of this communication. In short, continuity and change have to do with the dynamic between truth, which is permanent and unchanging, and historically conditioned apprehension and thematization of this truth. In addition, this dynamic is consistent with the very mystery of God and the human transcendent spirit which is open to this infinite horizon. As Rahner proposes, if God is the source of truth, i.e., the first truth, which is unchanging and permanent, then human beings must have been created in such a way that they are capable of knowing God and also revealed truth, by way of their graced transcendent spirit, even when this very existence is historically conditioned and changing. In short, God must have created human beings with a transcendent though finite, created spirit that can know truth.

Throughout his work, Rahner demonstrates that the continual exchange between God and human beings is often imperceptible from the human vantage point, because the world of human living is naturally temporal and evolving. It is not always clear to persons how the one and the same God does not change through history, even though the experience of God can be expressed in myriad of ways. Rahner intends to use the notion of mystery, as pervasive of human existence, in order to make this dynamic of continuity and change more understandable to contemporary persons. Therefore, as Rahner deals specifically with issues of historicity and revelation, he also attempts to bring tradition into harmony with contemporary contexts without compromising the Gospel message. Indeed, this method was well known to contemporary
theologians. Hans Urs von Balthasar once said of Rahner’s work: “Karl Rahner is like an ox that does not step out of the harness until he has moved the cart of tradition to which he is hitched a jolt forward.”14 This is an important point in understanding Rahner, for often the resistance to his theology came from the many theologians and the magisterium who did not see any need for moving the cart of tradition. In order to keep the memory of Jesus Christ alive today, along with two thousand years of Christian tradition and an even older Scriptural tradition, Rahner calls for a deep faithfulness to the message of the Christ which comes to us through tradition and our lived experience.

Procedure—This thesis explores Rahner’s account of revealed truth by way of a consideration of God as Holy Mystery and of human existence as being open to the infinity and intimacy of this Holy Mystery. As a concrete expression of this relationship, this thesis considers Rahner’s thought on the development of dogma.

Chapter One focuses on Holy Mystery; it is a reflection on Rahner’s doctrine of God, i.e., its roots in the tradition of the Church as well as Rahner’s own distinctive contribution. The goal of this chapter is twofold: one, to explain that human beings are related to a God who is permanently incomprehensible, both in this life and in the visio beatifica, and two, that human experience of God is always an experience of the incomprehensible God. Because of this basic, original experience of God, Rahner says that human knowledge and human articulation can never exhaust or completely grasp the totality of who God is, and, therefore, of who human beings are in relationship to this incomprehensible mystery. In other words, there are potentially infinite

ways to express who God is and who we are.

Chapter Two expands the discussion of Holy Mystery to consider Rahner’s articulation of the relationship between the Holy Mystery and the human person. The context of human living is such that, not only does God exist as incomprehensible mystery in relationship to human beings, but human living is oriented toward God precisely because of the created openness of human being. Human beings can, therefore, know that they are finite spirits, i.e., transcendent, through their human faculties. Even prior to the discussion of grace, Rahner holds that human persons can know that their orientation is towards an infinite horizon, that they can always ask a further question about themselves and their reality, that they can transcend themselves. Further, Rahner maintains that the very goal of this transcendence—the infinite horizon—is a personal God who has not only established the difference between Godself and human being, but has overcome this difference in the life and cross of Jesus the Christ. As scholastic theology named it, ‘elevated’ human nature presumes not only that God has established Godself as the infinite horizon, but that God has truly drawn close to human beings. God is not simply distant and remote, God is also intimate, a ‘real home.’ This reflection on human being as fundamentally oriented towards the infinite horizon who has revealed itself to be Holy Mystery, that whom we name God, allows Rahner to assert unreservedly that human being, which includes our faculties and our context, is the event of God’s self-communication.

Chapter Three explores the development of dogma as an explicit instance of Rahner’s approach to a contemporary person’s query about the possibility of revealed truth in constantly changing and differentiated human contexts. The goal of this chapter is to demonstrate that what has been said about mystery and human living in relationship to revealed truth is recognizable in a concrete example, i.e., dogmatic development. Such an example is helpful in providing
distinctions (not dualisms) by which contemporary persons might more fully appreciate the meaning of dogmas for their personal and ecclesial lives.

The conclusion of this thesis affirms Rahner’s conviction that, while human existence is characterized by plural and multivalent expressions of revealed truth, it remains primarily and ultimately oriented towards the one, single mystery who is God. Rahner can then respond to contemporary persons by affirming that human beings have the capacity, by their finite and transcendent spirit, to know that it is God to whom they are oriented as source and term. In this way, Rahner maintains that revealed truth is knowable, indeed, inherent to the constitution of human being as made by, guided by, and directed towards the incomprehensible mystery as the very fulfillment of their humanity, that is, as the source of salvation.
Karl Rahner’s Theology of Mystery

Karl Rahner’s theology is a rich tapestry of scripture and tradition which is woven together with the concerns and insights of his contemporary context. A clear and consistent refrain echoes throughout Rahner’s theology: we must let ourselves go into the immeasurable depths, the Infinite Horizon, the Holy Mystery who is God. This is the given: Rahner trusts this to be true. It is this mystery which is the source of human existence, that which pervades the whole of human existence, and is its goal. We hear this refrain in his prayers, theological reflections, homilies, interviews, and lectures. Rahner’s experience of mystery pervades not only his theology, but his life—a point which Rahner carries into his theology by way of his emphasis on the human experience of God.

Within Catholic theology, there is a long tradition of naming God as ‘hidden,’ ‘absolute mystery,’ and ‘incomprehensible.’ From this tradition, Rahner draws heavily upon the theology of Thomas Aquinas. However, Rahner says that if we are to access Thomistic teaching on the incomprehensibility of God, it must be understood that “this incomprehensibility is to be found in the witness of Scripture and tradition.”15 Both scripture and tradition witness to the God of whom Augustine wrote: “If you understand it, it is not God.”16 The tradition of the Christian Church is rich with prayers, rites and theological reflection on the incomprehensibility of God.


16Ibid.
Chapter One establishes the framework for addressing the contemporary person’s question about plurality and abiding meaning. Even prior to considering how it is that human beings can recognize and appropriate revealed truth, a consideration which will be addressed in Chapter Two, Rahner begins with the first truth—namely, God who is Holy Mystery. This initial reflection on the doctrine of God—via its roots in the tradition of the Church and Rahner’s distinctive contribution to it—will show that human beings are related to a God who is permanently Incomprehensible both in this life and in the visio beatifica, and, therefore, that human experience of God will always be an experience of the incomprehensible. Appreciating God as Holy Mystery serves the goal of this thesis because it elucidates the very basis of human being as grounded in the Incomprehensible God which means that human knowledge and human articulation can never exhaust or completely grasp the totality of who God is and, further, who human beings are, as beings who are constantly in relationship to this Holy Mystery. In other words, there are potentially infinite ways to express who God is and who we are.

Chapter One examines Rahner’s doctrine of God as Holy Mystery as it is rooted in the tradition of the Church. With Dei Verbum, the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, Rahner affirms that scripture and tradition are so intimately related that they flow “from the same divine wellspring.” Both provide a touchstone for Rahner as he articulates his theology of mystery. Rahner looks at scripture and the tradition of the Church to see what has been said about mystery, how our ancestors in the Church have interpreted both the biblical articulation of mystery and mystery in their own lived experience, how these understandings have been refined through the challenges of the Enlightenment and modern philosophy, and finally how these new

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(and yet old) insights are alive to us today. In his reexamination of the historical development of the notion of mystery, Rahner emerges with an understanding of mystery which can enable contemporary persons to recognize God as the source of human existence, as One who comes to us continually as mystery, and as One whom we can know as mystery in ongoing daily experience. From this understanding of God as Holy Mystery must follow that whatever human beings know and articulate is shaped from the first by mystery.

In this reflection on Rahner’s doctrine of God as Holy Mystery, I will first highlight the Scriptural passages and themes which ground and enliven Rahner’s theology of mystery. Second, I will investigate particular sources within the tradition of the church from which Rahner draws insights into the meaning of mystery, and then moves beyond them into dialogue with the modern world. Third, I will examine his articulation of the notion of mystery and why it is that he considers his work to be a “more radical reflection” on mystery. The data drawn from scripture and tradition are present throughout the whole of Rahner’s theology and constitute the basic foundation of his theological reflection. The goal of the concluding section of this chapter is to illustrate how Rahner’s understanding of primordial mystery is a fundamental key to responding to the contemporary person’s question about finding abiding meaning in plural and multivalent expressions of revealed truth.

1. The Notion of Mystery in Scripture

Rahner explicitly cites several passages from scripture which inform his theology of mystery. In Phil 3:12, Paul writes: “Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.” Again, in 1 Cor 9:24, Paul writes: “Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives
the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it.” Both passages contain an image of a dynamic relationship between the initiative of God and human response—a relationship which implies progress and development. Both passages imply that we are oriented towards fulfillment, but can only move towards it and not attain it completely in this life. Paul writes in Rom 11:33: “O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!”

These passages are significant for two reasons. First, Rahner acknowledges his participation in a context larger than his own immediate context and history by reverencing the insights of scripture. Second, these passages provide the substance of Rahner’s understanding of mystery. It is important to note that Rahner groups these passages together when he is reflecting on the scriptural articulation of the mystery of God.18 Interpreted in relationship to each other, these passages integrate the constant presence of the incomprehensible God with human striving that cannot attain its goal in this world. In other words, the basis of human striving has its root in God’s incomprehensibility, such that ultimately only God can satiate the human desire. Human being is the question whose answer cannot be found in the world of creation, as beautiful as it is. The answer lies only in the infinite horizon, the unnamable mystery which is constantly pursued.19

In his article “Mystery” from the fourth volume of Sacramentum Mundi, Rahner uses scripture to explain briefly how God comes to human beings as mystery: “God is he whom no one has seen (Jn 1:18; 6:46; 1 Jn 4:20); he lives in unapproachable light (1 Tim 6:16), and his


free action in regard to man is a ‘mystery’ (Mk 4:11 par.; 1 Cor 2:7; Eph and Col, passim).”

Rahner draws similar evidence from the Hebrew scriptures. He cites Jer 32:18-44. The *Jerome Biblical Commentary* suggests that the atmosphere of these verses is one of disillusionment. The people have been expecting the messiah whom God promised, and yet the concrete events of their lives suggest otherwise: the Israelites have disobeyed God, the land is overrun with Chaldaeans, and Jeremiah has done everything that God has asked. Still, the Israelites remain under siege. Even in these dire circumstances, God proposes yet another *argumentum per absurdum* to prove the persistence of God's promises. This passage testifies again to the incomprehensibility of God, that God's ways far surpass human ways. Rahner also cites Job 11:7 in which Zophar the Naamathite says to Job: “Can you find out the deep things of God? Can you find out the limit of the Almighty?”

Finally, Rahner offers us Moses. The entrance of Moses into darkness on the mountain to converse with God typifies human knowledge of God. Through the intermediary of a dark cloud, Moses encounters God's utter transcendence. As an image, then, this theophany reflects the basic human knowledge of God as being one in which all is not perspicuous, where there is “fear and trembling” because of the awesomeness of God, and where humans can do nothing except walk into the incomprehensibility of God.

Such passages from scripture offer varying perspectives on the single mystery of God.

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22 Rahner draws this insight about Moses from Gregory of Nyssa; Rahner, “Mystery,” 134.

23 Ibid.; cf. Ex 20:18-21
which determines human knowledge of God. While these passages are explicitly cited, Rahner’s theology is so steeped in scripture that it pervades his writing even without notation. Rahner holds scripture as norma non normata, hence his continual return to scripture as a guiding light.

Each of these passages must be taken in the context of the entire corpus of scripture and of the history of grace. Commenting on Rahner’s understanding of God’s self-communication in history, Thomas O’Meara writes, “God’s love and plan are revealed not all at once but in time over the course of centuries. Salvation history is not simply a few biblical stories about Abraham and Moses and Jesus; it is the very history of the world rooted in and completed by God’s Word made flesh in Jesus of Nazareth.”

This understanding of scripture is an important guide for persons of every time and place because persons never stand independent of scripture and must always seek to measure their lives, their understanding of various faith statements and their relationship to the world in which they live by scripture, “since it is in Scripture that the one whole apostolic faith has been objectivated and has given itself, and laid down for all future times.”

We can see, then, how Rahner might see in scripture a basis for his reflections on the dynamic of continuity and change, i.e., how to hold together both plural and multivalent faith statements which have abiding meaning in the one referent who is God. Rahner sees these two elements not as diametrically opposed to one another, but in constant relationship with one another. The passages on mystery upon which he reflects indicate a relationship in which there

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is development, evolution, or, as Paul has described, “pursuit” (Phil 3:12) of truth. These
dynamic elements point to the ongoing character of relationship with God which involves an
interplay of divine initiative and human acts. The goal of this dynamism is that which we know
to be the incomprehensibility of God. Rahner shows through Jeremiah, Zophar and Moses that
the darkness and incomprehensibility of God communicate that God is never fully known or
seen; that while God has human being in God’s grip, humans can never fully grasp God in God’s
totality. Thus, scripture offers the contemporary person the witness that human beings will
always grapple with how to express their experience of the God who relates to humans as
incomprehensibility. Further, scripture says that God, though incomprehensible to human
beings, is in ongoing communication with human beings.

In order to understand more fully these Scriptural passages and the insights which Rahner
derives from them, one must turn to tradition as the complementary element “flowing from the
same divine wellspring.”

2. The Notion of Mystery in Tradition

Prior to the Second Vatican Council, the notion of the incomprehensibility of God was used
more often than that of mystery. The focus of this section will be on Thomas Aquinas’s
understanding of the incomprehensibility of God, since this was Rahner’s primary historical
source as he articulated his theology of mystery. Rahner also draws from other sources in the
tradition, but these are not as explicitly explored in his theology.

\[26 Dei Verbum, a. 9.\]
Historical Theology—Two articles, “The Concept of Mystery in Catholic Theology” in the fourth volume of Theological Investigations, as well as “Mystery” in Sacramentum Mundi, provide the richest sources for a theology of mystery based upon the data of tradition. Again, as with scripture, there are a few places where Rahner has noted specific contributions to his understanding of mystery. The importance of his investigation lies both in what these sources have to say and in the profoundly Catholic regard that he has for tradition.

In “Mystery,” Rahner reflects on the witness of the tradition to the incomprehensibility of God:

... in the struggle against Gnosticism and the rationalism of Arianism (Eunomians), the Fathers of the Church emphasized the incomprehensibility of God the Father; the patristic period and the Middle Ages developed the theologia negativa “per modum negationis et eminentiae”. Even for the Fourth Lateran Council (D 432) the unlikeness between God and creature is greater than their likeness. 27

Rahner gives a more comprehensive account of classicist theology's understanding of the incomprehensibility of God in “The Hiddenness of God” in the sixteenth volume of Theological Investigations. In his initial comments, Rahner compares terminology: hiddenness versus incomprehensibility. On one level, these terms seem interchangeable, possibly even with the word mystery. Rahner, however, wants to probe more deeply into these notions; and so, each has its own particular connotations for him. Concerning the use of incomprehensibility rather than hiddenness, Rahner asks, “Does [incomprehensibility] mean that a metaphysical treatment of the question is preferred to an investigation from the perspective of the history of salvation and revelation?”28 Rahner discusses this saying that the notion of the incomprehensibilitas of God


emerges from the doctrine of the infinity of God: the human person is a finite, created being who
cannot “exhaust the possibilities of knowledge and truth contained in this absolute fullness of
being.” What classicist theology—and with it, much of Church teaching—continually
underscored was the fact that the human intellect fails when it comes to understanding God. But,
incomprehensibility characterized the deities of many other cultures. That the reality of God is
greater than human beings, that God’s ways are inscrutable, that God holds the power of life and
death—these were understood, according to the authors of the Hebrew scriptures, to extend as far
back as creation itself.

Rahner understands this notion of mystery to be focused on “the pilgrim state” of human
beings in such a way that while not comprehended in this life, mystery would be comprehended
in the next. This, Rahner says, is the dangerous illusion that “the mystery of reality as such is
merely that part of it which still remains obscure for the time being even though in principle it is
comprehensible, a part, therefore, which is constantly being diminished as the various branches
of science advance, and which is destined ultimately to appear completely at least in the ‘visio
beatifica’.” Theology is constantly in danger of embracing this illusion. This
incomprehensibility was too often seen as relating only to the finitude of rational capacity rather
than the absolute fullness of experiencing God.

Rather than accept this notion that God will be understood in the beatific vision, Rahner
plumbs the tradition for more honest presentations of mystery. Rahner’s reductio in mysterium is
precisely this attempt to present mystery as the very foundation not only of theology, but more
fundamentally, of human existence. This notion of mystery is markedly different from the

29Ibid., 229.
notion that what is unclear or unknown now will someday become perspicuous.

Rahner sees another element in the discussion of the incomprehensibility of God which he says is under-emphasized in classicist theology (and this is perhaps his reasoning behind using ‘hiddenness’ instead of ‘incomprehensibility’). While classicist theology generally understood the incomprehensibility of God to be a deficiency in the capacity of the human intellect, there is present in the history of theology a more positive understanding which suggests that the fullness of knowledge of God is precisely the fact that God is Incomprehensible; or, in Rahner’s language, God is Absolute Mystery, God is Infinite Horizon.

Rahner finds this positive understanding in various treatises, for example, on the visio beatifica:

The Greek Fathers did not under-estimate [sic] the glory and the light of the beatific vision and they did not really adhere to Platonism (an intellectualism which could only think of the incomprehensible as something provisional) when they praised the abiding mystery as blessedness. According to the Areopagite, when we reach the highest stage of life and knowledge, we enter into the darkness in which God is; according to Maximus the Confessor, not to know is the supra-rational knowledge; according to St Gregory of Nyssa, to enter the holy of holies is to be encompassed by the divine darkness.\(^{31}\)

Rahner goes on to say that this understanding of the incomprehensibility of God is truly Christian, for it allows the human being to enter freely into the abiding mystery of God without an underlying expectation that the mystery will be dissolved in the beatific vision, or that all will be made clear. Rather, the ancestors of our tradition state that divine darkness is “blessedness” and that “the highest stage of life and knowledge” is to enter the mystery of God.


We begin to see here that if the *visio beatifica* of God is precisely the seeing that God is totally incomprehensibility, then we can no longer assert that the incomprehensibility of God is a result of the *provisionality* of human knowledge. Rather, the *completeness* of human knowledge can only be found precisely *in* recognizing the incomprehensibility of God. In the *visio beatifica*, in contrast to "pilgrim knowledge," humans have:

... immediate sight of the mystery itself and the merely indirect presence of the mystery after the manner of the distant and aloof.... Grace does not imply the promise and the beginning of the elimination of the mystery, but the radical possibility of the absolute proximity of the mystery, which is not eliminated by its proximity, but really presented as mystery. When he sees God, God's incomprehensibility is the content of his vision and so the bliss of his love. It would be a foolish and anthropomorphic misunderstanding to think that the proper object of vision and bliss was something perspicuous, comprehensible and perfectly well understood, merely surrounded as it were by an obscure margin and a limit set by the finitude of the creature who must resign himself to this. What is comprehended and what is incomprehensible are in reality one and the same thing.\[^{32}\]

Rahner says that to understand incomprehensibility is to assert that incomprehensibility has content even though it is inexpressible; otherwise, it would be a "blank intelligibility, the mere absence of a reality."\[^{33}\]

*Thomas Aquinas*—The contour of Rahner's search for a deeper understanding of mystery is sharpened in his investigation of the notion of incomprehensibility in the theology of Thomas Aquinas. In fact, his exploration into scripture and other sources in tradition is a prelude to his investigation into Thomas's theology.

The question that Rahner brings to Thomas is how can God remain incomprehensible to

\[^{32}\text{Ibid., 55.}\]

\[^{33}\text{Ibid.}\]
human beings even when they are "raised up by grace and the light of glory and given the capacity to have the beatific vision." Rahner does not want the mystery of God to be a mere component of God, opaque and devoid of serious content. Rahner understands Thomas’s doctrine of the incommensurability of God as a statement that the fullness of God is experienced precisely in God’s incommensurability (what Rahner calls turning mystery back upon itself), rather than as a statement that the visio beatifica is the time when human beings will be able to comprehend God. He also sees Thomas’s doctrine as transforming the notion of mystery into “an inexpressible mystery, which is the ultimate mystery of man himself.” For Thomas, this turning mystery back upon itself concerns a more fundamental relationship between divine being and finite being. Rahner’s exploration of this relationship in Thomas’s theology reveals the importance of the notion of the visio beatifica. Rahner says that both the relationship between God and human beings and the visio beatifica must be addressed if one is to understand Thomas’s doctrine of the incommensurability of God. In the course of doing that, Rahner highlights some important insights which are key to his own theology of mystery.

Rahner’s first concern in Thomas’s theology is the relationship between absolute or pure being and finite existence. Rahner says that this relationship is first analogous to the notion of creation when creation is understood to be in a unique type of relationship and not simply a consequence based on a general scheme of casuistry. The relationship of creation to God is unique because God distinguishes Godself from human being by freely creating humans beings

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34Rahner, “An Investigation of the Incommensurability of God in St Thomas Aquinas,” 245. Note: the following reflections on the theology of Thomas in this section emerge primarily from this article. Only direct quotations and other sources will be quoted. For specific references to Thomas’s theology, please see the above article, fn. 3, 245.

35Ibid., 245.
to be human beings. In this distinguishing, God also affirms God’s identity as Absolute. A general scheme of casuistry would instead assert that the distinction between God and human being is prior to the relation of God to creation rather than through the agency of one of the participating beings, i.e., God.

In order to understand more fully this unique and fundamental relationship, Rahner says that Thomas introduced the notion of the *lumen gloriae* so that God’s incomprehensibility might be made intelligible to human beings who must remain distinct from God. The *lumen gloriae* is basically the gift of God’s grace to human beings which has become a part of human beings, i.e., created grace, enabling the intelligibility of the incomprehensibility of God. This *lumen gloriae* is itself formed by the self-communication of God as both “its effect and the condition of its possibility.”

Rahner’s second concern in Thomas’s doctrine of the incomprehensibility of God is the *visio beatifica*. This *visio* emerges from the self-communication of the Incomprehensible God and the *lumen gloriae* which preserves the notion of the direct vision of God. This *visio* radically distinguishes absolute being from finite existence. It allows humans to assert that indeed God is incomprehensible; but, this God also makes it possible for human beings to know God—not as comprehensible in the sense that what was previously unknown or unclear is now known. Rather, God permits human beings to know God as the Holy Mystery, the darkness of incomprehensibility itself. This is how Rahner understands Thomas’s turning mystery back upon itself and transforming it into “an inexpressible mystery, which is the ultimate mystery of man.

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36Ibid., 252.
For Aquinas, the doctrine of the incomprehensibility of God is not so much a statement about or a characteristic of God; rather, it is essentially a comment on the finite nature of human being. Rahner writes:

Divine incomprehensibility is of vital importance for human self-understanding: it affects all man's knowing and does not emerge when man is specifically concerned with God.... All human knowing ... is enfolded in an incomprehensibility which forms an image of the divine incomprehensibility where God reveals himself as the one without a name.\(^{38}\)

The implications of this radical understanding of incomprehensibility as permeating human existence will be further explored in the second part of this chapter and in Chapter Two on human living. What is beginning to emerge in Rahner’s writing is the notion that incomprehensibility—or mystery, as Rahner comes to understand it—is consistently present in all of human living. It is an element of continuity which influences, shapes, and permeates human knowledge of God, truth and humans themselves.

Rahner’s inquiry into tradition and Thomas’s doctrine of the incomprehensibility of God has yielded several things. One, Rahner’s theology is linked not only to this particular Thomistic doctrine, but to some basic themes in Thomas’s theology as well as the tradition of the Church. This provides Rahner a sure footing for articulating his theology of mystery. Two, Rahner has derived important insights into mystery by examining traditional sources, particularly that of Thomas, which are focused on the relationship of the infinite God to the finite human being, and specifically by way of consideration of the *visio beatifica*. One of the most important insights is that the experience of God as incomprehensible is fundamental to human beings’ relationship to

\(^{37}\)Ibid., 245.
God. This and other insights will be drawn together more fully in the next section of this chapter. Finally, this investigation has demonstrated that Rahner’s thought is grounded in scripture and tradition, an important point of his attempt to be intellectually honest about understanding the relationship between abiding meaning in and through the mystery of God and the plural and multivalent expressions of the experience of this mystery, particularly in faith statements. It illustrates to contemporary persons that the scriptures and the tradition of the Church taken together are a tool not only for appreciating what has been said but, more importantly, for interpreting their experience in their own historical context.

3. Karl Rahner’s More Radical Notion of Mystery

The goal of this third section is to summarize the main characteristics of Rahner’s theology which build upon but also distinguish his understanding of mystery from traditional articulations of mystery. Rahner believes that his theology of mystery is a more radical understanding of mystery than had been previously articulated. While Rahner finds insights within previous sources—such as the theology of Thomas and the Church Fathers—and does not contradict this tradition, Rahner moves the notion of mystery to a more profound understanding. Rahner marks this transition into a more radical reflection in the follow series of questions:

What if we must take the mystery not as the provisional but as the primordial and permanent, so much so that the absence or disregard of mystery, preoccupation with the seemingly known and perspicuous proves to be the provisional, which dissolves before the gradual revelation of the abiding mystery, as such, to the finite reason? What if there be an ‘unknowing’, centred on itself and the unknown, which when compared with knowledge, that is, with any knowledge not really aware of itself, is not a pure negation, not simply an empty absence, but a positive characteristic of a relationship between one subject and another? What if it be

\[38\] Ibid., 253.
essential and constitutive of true knowledge, of its growth, self-awareness and lucidity, to include precisely the unknown, to know itself orientated from the start to the incomprehensible and inexpressible, to recognize more and more that only in this way can it truly be itself and not be halted at a regrettable limit.  

Rahner understands his more radical reflection as involving three interrelated elements: mystery as primordial, mystery as positive, and finally, mystery as one.

**Mystery as Primordial**—Rahner says that his reflection is more radical, *first*, because it allows mystery to extend throughout God’s self-communication and the response of human beings. He integrates the notion of mystery in all of his theology because he understands it to refer to God the Holy Mystery whose grace is in all things. Rahner is not proposing that his reflection on mystery is a reflection on a reality different from what was previously reflected on as incomprehensibility. Rather, he is saying that this notion must be seen as fundamental or primordial to theology, and, ultimately, to human existence. Rahner says:

> The concept of mystery, which of course is part of traditional theology, but also such concepts as freedom, hope, and humanity’s insurpassable plurality, are assigned a different value. To a certain extent they are used in a primordial way. They become concepts in such a way that somehow, to the extent I accomplish it, they permeate the whole of my theology.

The notion of mystery is the key to understanding all of Rahner’s theology. It permeates all of his work rather than receiving treatment in only a portion of his theology.

Earlier theologians, such as Thomas Aquinas, recognised the reality of the mystery or

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incomprehensibility of God as fundamental to human existence as well as the knowledge of God. However, this insight was often treated in a limited way and neglected precisely as the basis of the relationship between God and human beings. In regard to Thomas, for example, Rahner says:

Thomas had one specific article in his Summa which dealt with God’s incomprehensibility. And to Thomas it was obvious that this incomprehensibility, therefore God as absolute mystery, was not even abrogated by the beatific vision. Now, without entering into a more subtle interpretation of Thomas it is still true that this statement is only one of many that Thomas made. It appears in a specific place and, of course, is significant and exciting.41

Thus, Rahner underscores that his theological reflection on mystery is primordial, i.e., permeating theology and human existence, and that this reflection does not contradict earlier reflections, but rather heightens the significance of the notion of mystery. Rahner believes this to be a more authentic approach because the nature of mystery as primordial demands that it be treated comprehensively. Rahner’s approach to mystery involves both proclaiming that mystery has a fundamental relationship to the human being as a whole, and using mystery as a primordial concept in his theology. What Rahner sees as even more significant, however, is that God is Holy Mystery—“so essentially and perpetually, that this Whither of transcendence, mastering, unmastered and holding sovereign sway, can be given the name of God—as indeed the name of God is the nameless infinity.”42 Rahner understands mystery as being oriented towards the whole person, the person who not only knows, but chooses—with the ultimate possibility of choosing Love. This understanding of mystery, then, is fundamentally different from that of traditional theology. It allows Rahner to make a more radical reflection and to base his theology on such an approach.

41Rahner, “Grace as the Heart of Human Existence,” 23.

42Rahner, “The Concept of Mystery in Catholic Theology,” 60.
understanding of primordial mystery.

*Mystery as Positive—Second.* Rahner’s understanding of mystery is a more radical reflection because it makes mystery a *positive* concept. This is perhaps the most defining element in Rahner’s theology of mystery because it marks a clear departure from the theologies which ascribed a negative value to mystery. At the heart of this negative definition is the concept of *ratio.* Rahner says that in classicist theology, mystery was understood to be oriented toward *ratio:* "it is something mysterious to reason." Rahner found this lack of comprehensibility to human reason to be merely provisional, and, therefore, an inauthentic account of mystery. This old, traditional criterion of mystery was “basically reduced to a defective mode of knowledge which is essentially oriented to the mystery as such.”

The Christian tradition has indeed attested to God as mystery. However, this has been under-emphasised because “there was always the danger of regarding God’s mystery as something that will be overcome, at least in the beatific vision, instead of precisely what will endure and will constitute our perfect happiness when we are united to God in ecstatic love. Moreover, the existence of mystery is usually explained by man’s pilgrim state (cf., for example, *D 1796*).” Rahner sees this negative notion at work particularly in the theology of the magisterium’s teaching on mystery. “Both Pius IX and Vatican I state without qualification that these mysteries exist for us ‘as long as in this mortal life we are on pilgrimage far from the Lord.’” Further, Rahner says that in this theology, mystery is given a purely negative definition.

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43Ibid., 38.

44Ibid., 42.

45Rahner, “Mystery,” 134.
“It is a truth which cannot for the moment be raised to the level of perspicuous insight which is proper to the ratio. It is a truth obscure and veiled, accessible only to faith but not to reason.”

It is not that Rahner is against the use of ratio in terms of appreciating mystery, nor is Rahner suggesting that ratio is not addressed by God’s self-communication as mystery. Rather, Rahner suggests that mystery is addressed to the unity of the intellect and the will, not simply ratio, by way of the following rhetorical reflection.

And may there not be a more primordial unity of the spirit, whatever its name, prior to the division into the ‘faculties’ of ratio and voluntas?—an authentically scholastic question. (cf. St Thomas, S. Th., I, q. 16, a. 4)—and may not this primordial unity be the reality to which the mystery is directed and related? In other words, perhaps the will and its freedom have the same essential relation to the mystery as the ratio, and the mystery to them, when they are considered in their original state of unity with the ratio.

Rahner responds to this rhetorical reflection with a yes. He concludes that, in fact, mystery does have “a more original and fundamental relationship to man as a whole, in the unity of his faculties, that is, to knowledge and the freedom of love, than the standard concept presents.”

More readily than many earlier thinkers, Rahner can claim that mystery is both positive and primordial precisely because of a shift in epistemology, indeed a move towards hermeneutics. In general, western philosophy presumed to be able to name objects by way of universal categories. Hence, even though protests were made to the contrary, there was a strong tendency to include God as an object of knowledge among other objects of knowledge. And so, even though it was acknowledged that God could not be completely comprehended by human beings, this very statement implied a negative interpretation of the human intellect. Rahner

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47 Ibid., 38.

48 Ibid., 60.
understood this approach to the incomprehensibility of God as “so firmly based upon a certain conception of knowledge and of truth obtained by such knowledge that God’s incomprehensibility merely forms the presupposition for a negative assertion of the finite nature of man.” The combination of “the Greek desire for absolute gnosis and the modern understanding of knowledge as a process which leads to the mastery of an object” could only result in understanding the incomprehensibility of God as “the ground for the permanent finitude of the creature negatively conceived.”

Rahner did not want to define the human intellect in such a negative way, and so he employed an epistemology which could begin with a positive statement about the human intellect without denying or diminishing the ultimate incomprehensibility of God.

Radically and intrinsically man is not a being who employs the idea clara et distincta (in the sense of Cartesian rationalism), nor is he the subject of an absolute system in which alone he and reality in general attain their conscious identity definitively (in the sense of German Idealism). The unlimited transcendentality of the finite human subject in knowledge and freedom, theory and practice, consists in going beyond any comprehensible statement and raising a further question; and likewise in having further and further questions put to it and being led into precisely what we call mystery.

Hence, Rahner holds that human knowledge is fundamentally directed towards the incomprehensibility of God; knowledge is an opening into mystery. Rahner illustrates this notion when he writes that theology must not merely speak a word about God nor should it seek to contain the mystery of God. Rather, it must seek to launch humans “into these unnamable

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50Ibid.

depths which constitute the incomprehensibility of love." This epistemological basis allows for a re-conception of mystery. Rather than seeing mystery as merely a component of God, Rahner sees mystery as underlying the totality of God and therefore of what we can know about God. This understanding also means that every level of theological reflection is affected by mystery. Mystery cannot remain isolated in the doctrine of God; it must also be understood within anthropology, history and the concrete, daily events of human living. Mystery must be understood to permeate how we understand christology, soteriology, eschatology and so forth. Rahner’s theology provides a gateway to examining the whole of theology from a renewed understanding of mystery.

**Mystery as One—Third.** Rahner’s reflection is more radical because he seeks to dissolve the notion of multiple or ‘random’ mysteries and, instead, to assert that there is one single mystery, *mysterium stricte dictum*, and that is God. Rahner inquires into traditional theology about the reasons supporting the notion of one single mystery versus a multiplicity of mysteries:

> The concept of divine incomprehensibility, as this is grasped by the human mind, naturally implies that it can be spelt out in an indefinite number of mysteries, always assuming of course that such a ‘multiplication’ does not contradict the basic notion of incomprehensibility.... [S]uch an assumption is far from obvious or illuminating..... If one starts from the position that the quality of mystery in the sense of a ‘mysterium stricte dictum’ can only be predicated of God alone and of no other reality, then the question of the ‘number of mysteries’ is seen in a new light. If such a number exists, then it must in any case be related to the incomprehensibility of God himself.

Traditional theology had assumed that the number and type of *mysteria stricte dicta* were caused

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by God’s free decision; these *mysteria* relate not simply to God’s incomprehensibility, but to
God’s free actions. Thus, they relate to created realities. But, Rahner says that the implications
of such a doctrine of the multiplicity of *mysteria stricte dicta* were not fully analyzed because
they suggest that a finite reality can be a mystery in the strict sense; but, according to the human
intellect, this cannot be. Rather, Rahner says that the multiplicity of mysteries must be
understood in the light of the one *mysterium stricte dictum*, i.e., the multiplicity of mysteries
relates to the incomprehensibility of God. Mysteries are only mysteries in so far as they relate to
the Mystery.

Rahner’s more radical reflection on mystery as one suggests that pluralism of mysteries
need not be understood as a sort of chaos—seemingly unrelated and devoid of any unifying
pattern. The unifying element is the source and goal of the mysteries which is the one mystery
who is God. This insight which Rahner draws out in his theology elucidates the issue of plural
and multivalent faith statements because it directs all faith statements back to one and the same
mystery. Faith statements are plural, i.e., they articulate many different facets of the experience
of God in many different historical forms; but, they are also multivalent, i.e., the many
expressions and meanings have one point of reference—God.

4. Mystery: The One “Divine Wellspring”

This final section of Chapter One attempts to integrate the insights of the preceding sections, that
is, of the scriptural and traditional influences of Rahner’s theology of mystery and his more
radical reflection on mystery by way of a reflection on mystery as the one “divine wellspring.”
The goal is to illustrate how Rahner’s understanding of primordial mystery is a fundamental key
to responding to the contemporary person’s question about finding abiding meaning in plural and
multivalent expressions of revealed truth.

In his article “Truthfulness” in *Encyclopedia of Theology: The Concise Sacramentum Mundi*, Waldemar Molinski identifies truth, in its ontological sense, as “the basic intelligibility of things, with God as the first truth. Further, God is held to be knowable but incomprehensible, while man is understood as a being created in order to know and love God, who finds therefore his true self in being blessed by God and giving himself to God.”54 This chapter has illustrated that this God who is the First Truth is also Holy Mystery. That which we call revealed truth finds its single referent in the Holy Mystery.

When, in Chapter Two, we consider the context of human living, it will be from the understanding that the Holy Mystery is the infinite horizon to which human beings are oriented and in which human beings live and move and have their being. Both scripture and tradition witness to the hiddenness of God in human living while the pluralistic aspects of human living are recognized more immediately. This context of human living—however changing and evolving—still contains the continuous self-communication of God in mystery. “That which we immediately experience and make living contact with is that which is in process of change, and it is the more immediate to us and the more apprehensible of the two entities. It is precisely in this—for all that the unchangeable factor is relatively apprehensible to us too—that this unchangeable factor has ever afresh to be believed in, hoped in, and acted upon in a spirit of faithfulness as that which is the more hidden of the two factors.”55


What this chapter has shown is that this *hiddenness* is not a reality devoid of content and meaning, but a positive, in fact primordial, basis for understanding God and oneself. Hiddenness or mystery, as Rahner articulates it in his theology, is a *permanent* element of our relationship with God. Thus, when Rahner says that the continuity aspect of the dynamic of continuity and change within human existence is *hidden*, we can connect that understanding with his understanding of mystery, which provides a framework for regarding the place of the hiddenness of God and, therefore, of the permanent in the context of our lives. It is precisely the Mystery in all its darkness and blinding lightness that carries the abiding validity of the truth of human existence. Out of the experience of this mystery—this wellspring—flows all of humanity’s knowledge, reflections, and articulations, even when these are not consciously observed.

As a first-level reflection, then, Rahner’s insight into God as Holy Mystery offers a preliminary response to the contemporary person’s question about the plurality of faith statements. Rahner says that we can be intellectually honest about our human condition by appreciating first that God is always incomprehensible mystery in relationship to human beings. That is, mystery is primordial to human existence: human *being*, human reflections, human actions, human articulations, etc., participate in and are shaped by mystery. Chapter Two will consider this insight in the context of human living to see how the nature of history and historicity also affect how humans live. Second, Rahner’s understanding of God as Holy Mystery informs us that humans are not somehow defective because they cannot comprehend God; rather, humans are directed precisely toward this Incomprehensibility as the fullness of human being. This insight can free a person from a mindset that ascribes a negative value to human beings’ incomplete or inadequate ability to understand or know God. The contemporary person who struggles with a rationalism that says reason alone can access and justify reality is
here offered a different way of thinking by recognizing the unity of human experience which does not exclude or prioritize any other elements of human being. One’s entire human being is addressed by and directed towards Holy Mystery. Finally, Rahner’s theology of mystery suggests to the contemporary person that all the many mysteries about which tradition has spoken and all the many ways that human beings experience God and themselves and express these experiences are ultimately directed towards the one, single mystery, i.e., the Holy Mystery.
II.

The Context of Human Living

In order to understand more comprehensively Rahner’s conviction that mystery is primordial to human existence and has one referent in God, we must consider how Rahner understands human existence. What Rahner wants to make clear is the fact that even though the mystery of God is incomprehensible, God is not unknowable. Rather, God is known precisely in God’s incomprehensibility. Rahner proposes that human beings have the capacity for transcendence such that they can know God truly and thereby know reality truly.

In order to articulate his understanding of transcendental anthropology, Rahner relies upon the philosophical turn to the subject and the emergent historical sciences which allow him to move an understanding of the human person beyond classicist categories to more appropriate contemporary understandings. This development does not contradict earlier formulations, but renders them understandable according to the language, concepts and contexts which constitute human experience today. Rahner’s transcendental anthropology holds important insights for appreciating more fully his theology of mystery and also for responding to the contemporary person’s question about abiding meaning in plural and multivalent faith expressions of revealed truth.

The goal of this chapter is to integrate more fully Rahner’s discussion on God as Holy Mystery with the concrete, historical context in which human beings experience this Holy Mystery. Whereas the first chapter focused on the incomprehensibility of God in relationship to
human beings, this chapter says that although God is Infinite Horizon, God also draws close to human beings in love such that humans can know God precisely in and through God's incomprehensibility. It is through this lens, then, that we will regard human knowing as capable of knowing truth and expressing this truth. This goal stands within the entire goal of this thesis, which is to synthesize Rahner's intellectually honest account of plural and multivalent faith statements throughout history.

This chapter proceeds first by situating Rahner's appreciation of history and his recognition of the dynamic of historicity in the wider philosophical context of the turn to the subject. This is not intended to be an exhaustive account of history, but simply an appreciation of the vast amount of reflections within both philosophy and theology which have contributed not only to Rahner's development of transcendental anthropology, but also to contemporary persons' understanding of God, themselves, and the world. Central to this discussion is how classicism shaped for a long time an understanding of human existence in a static way based on what it perceived to be universal and unchanging characteristics of both the human person and God. Rahner wants to move beyond this classicist mindset by re-conceiving human existence as constituted by the abiding presence of mystery as source, sustenance and term of human being. He also wants to avoid relativism which overemphasizes historical context and the subject to the exclusion of any continuity or truth that transcends the subject.

The second section is a reflection on Rahner's transcendental anthropology which says that not only are human beings open to an infinite horizon, but that God—incomprehensible mystery—has drawn close to human beings as their fulfillment in knowledge and love. In other words, God communicates Godself as both infinite horizon and intimacy. This reflection on human being as fundamentally oriented towards the infinite horizon who has revealed itself to be
Holy Mystery, that whom we name God, allows Rahner to assert unreservedly that our distinctly human being—our faculties and our context—is the event of God’s self-communication.

The third section brings into focus human knowing and expression of the experience of God as Holy Mystery. The goal of this section is to demonstrate Rahner’s position that God is both incomprehensible and knowable, and that humans have the capacity to express truly their experience of God even though their expressions will never be complete or exhaustive.

This chapter is intimately related to the previous chapter on Rahner’s doctrine of God. To speak solely of God as mystery is incorrect in the sense that we do not experience God as an object “out there” which can be neutrally observed. God and human being are united though not identical with one another. The goal, then, of this chapter is not to posit human living as a topic separate from a discussion of the mystery who is God; rather, it is to show that at the core of our human being, we have been taken hold of by the Holy Mystery. The mystery is the condition for the possibility of human existence. To suggest otherwise would be to say that human existence is grounded in itself; there is nothing beyond. This, Rahner writes, would be hell. Rather, he says that human existence is a graced existence whereby humans are fundamentally open to God, i.e., humans have been created with a transcendent spirit and can experience and know God truly.

1. The Turn to the Subject

Within philosophy and theology, the turn to the subject has afforded a new approach to regarding God and the world and to asking the ultimate questions of life. Joseph Möller provides a brief survey and exploration of philosophy’s growing consciousness of the human person. He says

that the definition of the human person as *animal rationale* became inadequate in light of new principles and insights in philosophical anthropology in the works of such thinkers as Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Karl Marx, Wilhelm Dilthey, Soren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, and Karl Jaspers, etc. Inherent to their thought was the notion of the human person as a historical being, as social, as a unity of existence and history, and so forth. The former, classicist categories of the human person were directly challenged.

Classicism emerged out of Neoplatonic and Aristotelian thought with its “admiration for what are perceived as classical qualities: order, maturity, harmony, balance, moderation.” In this metaphysical system “one can apprehend man abstractly through a definition that applies *omni et soli* and through properties verifiable in every man.... It follows ... that on this view one is never going to arrive at any exigence for changing forms, structures, methods, for all change occurs in the concrete, and on this view the concrete is always omitted.”

Within theology, Bernard Lonergan identifies classicism as bearing the assumption that “the unity of faith is a matter of everyone subscribing to the correct formulae.” The danger of classicism is that it can lead to the claim that truth is clear and unambiguous and that change, growth, new concepts and ideas are aberrations of the one, unchanging truth. Classicism was particularly operative in the teachings of the magisterium. The prevailing attitude claimed that “everything was clear and ... at least anything of importance could be decided on easily.

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unambiguously and, above all, quickly.”

Lonergan shares Lonergan’s view that this attitude may have been appropriate in its time, but can no longer account for the obvious variable elements in human knowing. “[It] is no longer the only conception or the commonly received conception; and ... its abstractness, and the omissions due to abstraction, have no foundation in the revealed word of God.”

While universality and clarity continued to be sought, there was also emerging a “growing perception of the differences of cultures and of the distance of each historical culture from the ideal norms laid down by reason.... There was a dawning sense of the historical relativity of every form of society, and also of every standpoint from which they were viewed.”

This movement offered Rahner, and many others, a new approach to understanding reality which would have profound implications for understanding the human person, the good, and the role of the Church in the world.

A very powerful example of this turn in history was afforded by the telescopes of Galileo and Copernicus. Both unsettled the classicist order and its notion of one right answer by proving that ecclesiastical and civil authorities were wrong about the nature of the world. Their discovery of “new truth” raised many disquieting questions which challenged not only the


64Lonergan, “The Transition from a Classicist World-View to Historical-Mindedness,” 2.

65I am grateful to Theresa Koernke for her insights into the turn to the subject as it relates to the “cracking” of classicist language. Theresa F. Koernke, IHM, “Shifting Language, Shifting Understandings” (paper presented at the IHM Theological Convocation, Monroe, Michigan, July 22, 1997).
order perceived by classicist philosophy, but the very foundation of society.

What is truth? Can we be sure that there is some untouched, pure fullness of ideas that is clearly expressed in our words? Can truth be controlled? Is the classical [sic] system of thought and language capable any longer of being completely adequate about what is? And, if ordinary human beings can discover truth for themselves, and can do so by the use of reason, is not the very notion of truth revealed by God absurd?66

Questions such as these mark the turn to the subject. Not only Copernicus and Galileo, but thinkers such as Martin Luther, Rene Descartes, John Locke, David Hume, and Immanuel Kant continued to sharpen the turn out of a classicist understanding of reality as clearly and universally knowable to an understanding of reality as intimately connected to the subject’s perspective. The implications for this turn to the subject were immense, for they took serious regard of human culture, popular philosophies and variant world views. This turn to the subject enabled, not only the emergence of new philosophical languages and systems, but also the metamorphosis of Western society into the modern era.

The shifting of paradigms from classicism to modern notions of the human person was known and fostered by Rahner in the realm of transcendental philosophy and theology. His Hearers of the Word was itself a refocusing of the philosophy of religion taken from the perspective of the human person as fundamentally oriented towards hearing God’s word, should God speak. Rahner’s theology represents, in many ways, the shift into a fuller understanding of the human person that appreciated the long tradition carried on from Aristotle and Aquinas. Rahner’s insights from philosophy and theology, as well as from historical science, allowed him to articulate a new approach to the human person.

66ibid.
This shift which Rahner’s theology represents is an important key to responding to a contemporary person’s question about the abiding meaning or continuity of faith statements throughout the history of the Church. Without appreciating the turn to the subject, it would be easy to rely upon the unchanging categories of classicist theology rather than to appreciate the value and influence of humans’ historical context which affords much more ambiguity—but also much more authenticity—in how we know truth and in what that truth really is. Rahner’s theological method, as this thesis has both explored and utilized, models an approach to how we know truth and what that truth really is by measuring our reflections against scripture and tradition, by appreciating the classicist philosophy which so shaped Church teaching and the Western worldview, by appreciating the attention given to the subject, and, finally, by looking at one’s own experience of God as mystery—one and the same God who relates to humankind throughout the ages.

The turn to the subject and the ongoing demise of classicism offer contemporary persons a better position to appreciate more genuinely God, themselves, and the world today. The turn to the subject affords new understandings of the nature of history and a renewed appreciation for the subjective awareness of individuals in the process of knowing as well as for the historical context which conditions that subject. Just as the turn to the subject helped to elucidate what it means to be a human—and for theology, what it means for the human person to stand before the mystery of God—it also drew attention to what is particular about individuals, cultures, geography, belief systems, and so forth. In other words, while there are many points of continuity and common patterns of human being, there is also much diversity in how such commonalities are expressed and lived out concretely. Diversity in human living is not necessarily an indicator of individualism or disorder; rather, diversity is a living embodiment of
the inexhaustible means by which creation can respond to its grounding in Mystery.\(^6^7\)

A consideration of the subject, then, must include an understanding of the nature of history and of how the mystery of God is incarnate within and among historical realities which are given to change. In human living, neither human being nor divine being exist in isolation from one another. Walter Kasper comments. "Revelation does not merely throw light on history, it also gives rise to it. The absolute gratuity of revelation brings with it its character of historical contingency."\(^6^8\)

While classicism was challenged by the *turn to the subject* and the emergent historical sciences, another danger became more evident: the tendency to claim that truth is relative only to the standpoint of the subject. In today's context, this view persists relentlessly. It is often combined with a certain possessive individualism which permeates the Western world. Other individuals and their truths are tolerated unless they begin to impinge upon one's own personal desires.\(^6^9\) This is the milieu in which many Christians live. It is inevitable that the values of such a milieu will either replace one's own values or present serious challenges to them. The reality of 'cafeteria Catholics' who pick and choose the teachings of the Church which suit their beliefs and discard the rest as 'old-fashioned' reflects this sort of relativism; such 'cultural Christians' feign the external appearances of Christianity, but fail to live the inner meaning of Christianity.

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\(^6^7\)One contemporary approach to this idea is through the notion of Chaos Theory. See Margaret J. Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science: Learning about Organization from an Orderly Universe* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 1992, 1994).


\(^6^9\)Such 'toleration' is no substitute for a truly 'inclusive' respect for the beliefs of others, nor does it lead to fruitful dialogue.
Relativism can also affect the inner workings of the Church and its teaching. Rahner identifies this extreme form of relativism as that “tangled chaos in which theologians and laymen feel that in matters of faith they can think and say anything and everything they wish.”

This kind of relativism denies the community nature of faith in Jesus Christ, and instead holds all interpretations of the faith as equally viable. This is contrary to the tradition of the Christian Church, which has maintained that the Church is in fact “able to express the Church’s faith in genuine human conceptuality as true and binding on everyone.”

The contemporary person is aware of the reality of relativism now more than ever. It remains a challenge, one to which this thesis addresses itself, to show how human knowledge is not only oriented towards but capable of expressing the Church’s abiding faith. How, then, is it possible to steer away from this isolationist relativism as well as classicist categories while allowing full appreciation of the historical context in which a person exists and the abiding presence of God in that existence?

2. Transcendental Anthropology

Rahner believes that when persons appreciate their own existence both as oriented towards the infinite horizon and fulfilled by the Holy Mystery in intimacy and as historically conditioned, then the question about holding together both historicity and revealed truth can be approached from a more genuine framework of human existence. This thesis has been establishing this framework, and it is the task of this particular section to present Rahner’s movement beyond classicism to a more dynamic understanding of the human person and the history in which

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70 Rahner, “Theology and the Church’s Teaching Authority After the Council,” 86.
humans live.

This section ‘completes’ Rahner’s doctrine of God in that it recognizes that we cannot speak of God as mystery without invoking God's relationship with human beings. God is not mysterious to Godself. Mystery necessarily implies relationship: “something which is mysterious to a given finite intellect.”

Rahner’s beginning point, then, is not with mystery but with the subject, the one who is confronted by mystery. In other words, when humans attempt to say something about God, they necessarily say something about themselves. Rahner articulates precisely this point in his prayer “God of My Life”: “if I try ... to speak to You about Yourself, You will still be hearing about me. For what could I say about You except that You are my God, the God of my beginning and end, God of my joy and my need, God of my life?”

What we say about God, then, is also a statement about ourselves. An accurate account of mystery necessarily inquires into the situation of human persons—not merely in their ontological status—but in their concrete existence, that is, one which is historically conditioned, mingled with light and darkness, temporality and change. Rahner maintains that in order to appreciate more fully God as mystery, we need to understand ourselves as persons who are hearers of the word, who are openness, who are question dynamically oriented toward answer.

In considering the human person who experiences God as mystery, Rahner says that it is constitutive of the human person to be oriented towards mystery. Prior to any discussion of grace and its activity in human existence, Rahner says that human beings can know that they are

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71 Ibid., 87.


finite spirits, i.e., transcendent, through their human faculties. He holds that human persons can know that their orientation is towards an infinite horizon. The very fact that they can always ask a further question about themselves and their reality is a sign of transcendence.\textsuperscript{74}

Rahner believes that this understanding of the human person, i.e., this transcendental anthropology, is more basic than the ones posited by empirical sciences. It does not treat one area of human being, nor does it exist as one anthropology next to others: rather, it is primordial to and pervasive of all of human existence.

Although this human existence is a finite one, the human person is in relationship with the infinite. Because human persons can question their finite realities and, indeed, their own finitude, they show themselves to be open to an infinite horizon. This infinite horizon to which human beings are oriented is not an infinity of nothingness because nothingness cannot ground nothing. As Chapter One proposed, the infinite horizon is not devoid of content because it is incomprehensible, rather it is positive precisely because of its incomprehensibility, an incomprehensibility which is given the name Holy Mystery. The openness to infinity is an openness to what Rahner calls absolute being.\textsuperscript{75} This does not render the human person as absolute being but rather as one who receives absolute being.

While it may be more attractive to stay with familiar ground, Rahner says that the human person cannot escape infinity, for "the infinity which he experiences himself exposed to also permeates his everyday activities."\textsuperscript{76} The human person is a transcendent being "insofar as all of


\textsuperscript{75}Ibid., 34.

\textsuperscript{76}Ibid., 32.
his knowledge and all of his conscious activity is grounded in a pre-apprehension (Vorgriff) of ‘being’ as such, in an unthematic but ever-present knowledge of the infinity of reality.” Further, the human person experiences “the presence of the infinity of being, as both revealed and concealed.”77 This experience is not one alongside others; rather, it is “a basic mode of being which is prior to and permeates every objective experience.”78 This experience is not always immediately obvious for it is present a priori “precisely when a person experiences himself as involved in the multiplicity of cares and concerns and fears and hopes of his everyday world.”79 In some ways, the contemporary person might find this a shocking realization because the modern world has separated well the so-called religious sphere from the so-called secular sphere. Rahner would emphasize to the contemporary person that all is sacred—from the earthiness of a child bathing in a muddied stream to Teresa of Avila’s tambourine dance to the “Lord of the Fleas.”

This transcendental reality of human being occurs in time and place; that is, it is rooted in history and subject to historicity. Rahner understands historicity to have the following meaning: “Historicity means that characteristic and fundamental determination of man by which he is placed in time precisely as a free subject, and through which a unique world is at his disposal, a world which he must create and suffer in freedom, and for which in both instances he must take responsibility.”80 Because historicity is a constitutive element of the human person, it must be accounted for in terms of salvation: “It is in history that the subject must work out his salvation

77Ibid.
78Ibid.
79Ibid.
80Ibid., 41.
by finding it there as offered to him and accepting it."81

Because transcendence and historicity are both constitutive elements of human beings, the human person is situated "between the finite and the infinite" which "is shown by the fact that it is in his infinite transcendence and in his freedom that man experiences himself as dependent and historically conditioned."82 This situation holds much ambiguity, but acknowledging that this is the inescapable state of human existence is a sound approach to dealing with the ambiguity and in being able to apprehend the revealed truth, which has abiding meaning, within that ambiguity.

The awareness of human transcendence is a competency of human nature; that is, it is natural knowledge. But, Rahner says that we cannot talk only about natural knowledge; nor can we talk only about that knowledge which comes to humans outside of their natural capacity, i.e., revelation. The two occur together even though they can be distinguished a posteriori. In other words, humans always know through grace even though there is a natural human ability to know reality truly. Humans cannot escape this graced and natural knowing, for even to close oneself to grace or to deny grace would be to do so precisely by grace.

The knowledge of God we are concerned with, then, is that concrete, original, historically constituted and transcendental knowledge of God which either in the mode of acceptance or of rejection is inevitably present in the depths of existence in the most ordinary human life. It is at once both natural knowledge and knowledge in grace, it is at once both knowledge and revelation-faith, so that distinguishing its elements is a subsequent task of philosophy and theology, but not really a reflexive act for this original knowledge itself.83

81Ibid.
82Ibid., 42.
83Ibid., 57.
This transcendental knowledge of God is also the experience of mystery. Human beings in their orientation towards the infinite horizon truly have God the Holy Mystery as the term of that orientation. "The reason why we had to call it 'mystery' consisted ultimately in the fact that we experience it as that which cannot be encompassed by a pre-apprehension which reaches beyond it, and hence it cannot be defined." Rahner further says that this mystery is also holy. It is holy because it is "nameless," and it is that "at whose disposal we exist and from which we are distanced in our finiteness, but which nevertheless we affirm in our transcendence through freedom and love." 

It is at this point that natural religion stops. The contemporary person could also stop short here and be resigned to this wonderful but somewhat impersonal orientation to the nameless one. Rahner proposes an alternative: this God—who is Holy Mystery, the nameless one—communicates God's own self. That is, there is not simply a natural relationship to the infinite horizon, there is a supernatural relationship. Rahner says that "the holy mystery is present not only as a remoteness and distance which situates us in our finiteness, but also in the mode of an absolute and forgiving closeness and an absolute offer of himself, all of which takes place of course only by grace and in the freedom of God communicating himself." 

In other words, not only are humans dynamically oriented towards absolute being, but God really draws near. God satisfies human longing; God offers us the food which will satisfy our hunger. The 'answer' to the question that is the human being is not that the question is answered, but that we renounce any kind of answer and instead allow "ourselves to be taken out

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84 Ibid., 65.

85 Ibid.

86 Ibid., 86.
of ourselves by this unanswered question. This incomprehensible venture, which sweeps all questions aside, is customarily referred to as the (devout) love of God.\textsuperscript{87}

In this act of love, God comes revealing Godself as the Holy Mystery. For humans, this mystery is the fullness of knowledge about and the experience of God. The goal of human being is not to dispel the mystery (which would be to circumscribe God); rather, the goal is to surrender \textit{into} the incomprehensibility of God—to heighten rather than dispel the mystery.

Grace does not imply the promise and the beginning of the elimination of the mystery, but the radical possibility of the absolute proximity of the mystery, which is not eliminated by its proximity, but really presented as mystery. When he sees God, God's incomprehensibility is the content of his vision and so the bliss of his love. It would be a foolish and anthropomorphic misunderstanding to think that the proper object of vision and bliss was something perspicuous, comprehensible and perfectly well understood, merely surrounded as it were by an obscure margin and a limit set by the finitude of the creature who must resign himself to this. What is comprehended and what is incomprehensible are in reality one and the same.\textsuperscript{88}

Mystery relates to God who alone is the Holy Mystery, the one who is the very basis of human existence, the energy giving us life and direction, and the goal of our life.\textsuperscript{89} The mystery of God is given to us not only as the pervasive ground of human transcendence but as the self-communication of God without compromising either finite, human nature or the infinite, incomprehensibility of God. This self-communication is rooted in the original experience of God; that is, it precedes any reflection or conceptualization on the part of human beings. Rahner writes that the phrase ‘experience of God’ implies that

\textsuperscript{87}Rahner, "The Concept of Mystery in Catholic Theology," 55. See chapter 4 and following of \textit{Foundations} for a further exploration of graced human nature

\textsuperscript{88}Rahner, "The Concept of Mystery in Catholic Theology," 55.

\textsuperscript{89}Similarly, Teilhard de Chardin understands this dynamic to be the convergence to the Omega Point. See Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, \textit{The Phenomenon of Man} (Fontana Books, 1965), 283-290; \textit{The Future of Man} (Fontana Books, 1969), 127.
there is something more, something different, and something more fundamental than that knowledge of God which can be acquired though so-called proofs of God’s existence. But in terms of human living in the concrete they are possible and meaningful only as the outcome of an a posteriori process of reasoning as the conceptual objectification of what we call the experience of God, which provides the basis and origin of this process of reasoning.  

Through this grace of God, God—infinite and transcendent—comes to human beings in the mode of closeness.

God is not simply “the distant, incomprehensible and asymptotic term of our transcendence,” but God has joined Godself to human beings. God the Holy Mystery has made Godself a constitutive element of human nature and its supernatural elevation. Not only is human nature dynamically oriented towards God as mystery, but God offers Godself as the only fulfillment of this human transcendence. “The fulfilment of human nature is the consummation of its orientation towards the abiding mystery.” This free gift of Godself is the core of mystery for human being. It brings together the absolute transcendence and incomprehensibility of God with the wholly intimate love of God. The mystery for human being is that we can believe in a God who is completely incomprehensible and fully revealed. This is the Holy Mystery to whom we can say and pray “You.”

Rahner’s consideration of the human person allows him to hold that the permanent


91 Rahner, Foundations, 119.

92 Rahner, “The Concept of Mystery in Catholic Theology,” 49.

93 Ibid.

meaning in human existence is based on the event of God’s self-communication in mystery to human beings. God does not merely arrive on the human scene and provide revelatory input; rather, God’s mystery stands before, permeates and remains the goal of human being. Rahner’s understanding of the human person—indeed, the very definition Rahner gives to the human person—is “a being who is referred to ‘God’, whose self-understanding must be based on God and point towards him.”95 Again, the human person is “the being of mystery.” Rahner is here establishing the fundamental identity of the person as oriented to God and as infinitely loved by God. Not only does God come as the object of human longing, but God comes freely in love as the fulfillment of this longing. This is the truth of human existence.

This means that in his self-knowledge and freedom he necessarily experiences himself—this being the condition of possibility of all actual and required knowledge and freedom—as at once translated beyond what is knowable (by clearly definable elementary data of experience), manageable and feasible into the region of the indefinable and incalculable. He realizes that it is in the light of this reference to the indefinable that he grasps and does the definable and thus differentiates himself as subject from the definable. This reference to the mystery is not a subsequent expansion of a perspicuous and manageable (and expanding) existence, but its condition and presupposition (in an inarticulate way), since it is only in this way that the gap between object and subject, subjectively realized in thought and action, is at all thinkable.96

Rahner continues that when the human person accepts the heightening of the mystery rather than its dispersion, the person is affirming the mystery of God as the ground of human existence.

The acceptance of reference to the mystery is the—implicit or explicit—acceptance of the existence of God as the perpetual ground of man’s existence, since no finite being (because always at once transcending) nor “nothing” (if the term is not distorted by mystifications so that it no longer means nothing) can found this openness.


96 Ibid., 1222.
Thus, within human nature itself, God has made Godself a constitutive part of human transcendence. But, God is also Holy Mystery. When we look into ourselves, into our human existence, we will find God as the mystery. We will walk with God on the “incomprehensible venture.” As Chapter One has revealed, this mystery is not akin to mystery in the ordinary, popular sense, as that which is unknown, but will be known. Rather, mystery will always remain mystery, and the meaning of human being is to grasp and be grasped by this mystery.

Rahner’s transcendental anthropology taken in conjunction with his theology of mystery reveals a content to this mystery which can be known but never exhausted. It allows him, and the contemporary person, to say that human existence—though finite, changing, and conditioned by historicity—is the event of the self-communication of God. The setting of this event is the context of human living which is important, necessary, and, indeed, holy. “A concrete history which is never fully plumbed by reflection is the necessary vehicle to man’s transcendent spirituality and freedom, so that through faith in the finite world bound by time and space one comes to know the eternal in the abstract and in himself.”

3. Knowing and Expressing the Mystery of God in the Context of Human Living

Rahner believes that we can, in fact, experience God in Godself. However, all subsequent reflection, conceptualization, and formulae of this experience are necessarily mediated through human vehicles which are not only created, but which really are where the self-communication of God takes place. Rahner refers to these vehicles of language, concepts, images, symbols, etc.


as *amalgams*, i.e., "inseparably mingled ideas, interpretations, etc.,” which are not necessarily part of the binding content of any article of faith.99

The expression of mystery may initially appear to be a futile task. It is one thing for human beings to know God as mystery in and through the context of their human experience; it is quite another to articulate something intelligible about the mystery which always remains inexhaustible. The Latin infinitive *exprimere* means "to squeeze out," "to wrest," or "to translate"—depending on the context of its use. There is a sense that what is experienced within must be brought without. In the context of expressing that which we encounter as mystery, this notion refers to the activity of naming God as the source of mystery, and refers as well to integrating this reflection on the experience of God into our life.

What is assumed here is that the experience of God does not occur in a vacuum. God is not a *part* of human life; God is the very basis of human existence. Rahner recognizes that this has not always been understood in our history, even though it may have been asserted in principle: “God was thought of in the world as an element of it, and not as that which supported it or as the unfathomable depths beyond it ...”100 Rahner, then, suggests that this kind of thinking was a way by which humans attempted to make God ‘comprehensible.’ In Chapter One, we considered Rahner’s reflection on the fact that, should persons ever imagine that they have *understood* God, such would be hell; rather, surrender to God’s in comprehensibility is the goal of human striving. Rahner notes that the average person today “has come clearly to recognize that God is absolutely incommensurable with the world, and that he cannot be included as one

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item within our calculations—and so on.'" Rahner continues to emphasize that we must see God as inexhaustible, not in a negative sense—we cannot know God—but in a positive sense—the transcendence of God cannot be exhausted by concepts, words, etc.

In the very act of self-transcendence, persons know the mystery of God, even when that experience is not brought to reflexive consciousness. When we experience God in and through our transcendence, we necessarily tap into the mystery of God in every act of transcendence—even when it is not reflected upon. However, the absence of reflexive awareness does not imply that the experience is not expressed in the sense described above. The experience of God, which is original—pre-conceptual and unreflexive—is brought out in the daily acts of the transcedent incarnated spirit, i.e., the human person. We express this experience of God from out of our very humanity, but also in more heightened moments (which may even be the mundane), such as through music, the wonder of a child, the breaking of bread, the calling of our name, and so forth. The list truly is limitless, because human transcendence is open to an infinite horizon. Every activity—even the act of shouting "I am not a transcendent being"—emerges out of human transcendence whose term is the mystery of God. How we live and move and have our being, then, expresses our relationship with God, whether directly or indirectly, explicitly or implicitly.

What Rahner's understanding of the human person allows him to assert is that the understanding of revealed truth is what is subject to change and, in fact, must change, if humans

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101 Ibid., 161.


103 e.g. Mary Magdalene meeting Jesus in the garden outside the empty tomb. "Jesus said to her, 'Mary!' She turned and said to him in Hebrew, 'Rabbouni!'" (Jn 20:16).
are to appropriate revealed truth in every time and place. This is a problem for religions which proclaim that the truth shall set you free. With Pilate we can ask, *Truth? What is truth?*\(^{104}\) What is it to which we are bearing witness? What is the truth for which Jesus was willing to give his life and his death? Whatever answer may be given to these central questions, Rahner says there will always be an "element of historicity present in every human recognition of truth."\(^{105}\) It is the Christian's task to plumb these questions so as to hear and to respond to the call of Jesus the Christ. The permanence in human knowledge about God is not usually immediately explicit in the context of human living. History accords human living an ever-changing context, development, evolution and growth: each implies a dynamic, a continual movement which Rahner says is oriented towards the Infinite Horizon who is God.

Our awareness of historicity means that we can no longer agree with some interpretations of traditional philosophy and theology that saw truth as clearly and unambiguously evident in itself; nor can we allow such presuppositions to motivate how we communicate and teach the Christian faith. What Rahner's reflections indicate is that we need not nevertheless resign ourselves to the conclusion that all is mystery and therefore revealed truth cannot be known. Rather, Rahner posits that humans have the capacity to know revealed truth—to be participants in God's ongoing communication—through transcendency, even while remaining finite creatures. The historical context within which we live—however characterized by change as it is—contains the original experience of God. In short, Rahner attempts to affirm clearly that human beings can know what is true, even though this knowledge is inseparably related to

\(^{104}\) Jn 18:38

human historical conditioning. It is the expression of this historically conditioned experience which is the concern of this section. The goal of this section, then, is to reflect on Rahner's affirmation that revelation comes to us through human vehicles, such as thought, concept, and in particular, word, and that because human existence is precisely a *graced* human existence, human utterances are really open to God and not merely created by humans.

The movement to reflect upon, conceptualize, and express the experience of God is a thematization of the original, unthemetic experience of God. The experience of God is unthemetic in that it exists even prior to consciousness of it, or reflection upon it. Rahner considers reflection, conceptualization, articulation, etc. of the experience of God to be subsequent to the original experience of God which is so primordial to human existence as to go unnoticed, particularly in the more mundane moments of life. Though the experience of God occurs prior to human thematization of it, there often arises the need, indeed the imperative, to express the word of God.

Human history is rich with examples of the dynamic of God's self-communication, human reception of this communication, and the need, then, to thematize this experience of the self-communication of God. From our own scriptures and tradition we have Moses who met with God and received the words of the Law and a song to comfort his people: "Give ear, O heavens, and I will speak; let the earth hear the words of my mouth.... For I will proclaim the name of the Lord; ascribe greatness to our God! The Rock, his work is perfect, and all his ways are just. A faithful God, without deceit, just and upright is he ..."106 We have Mary who went to her cousin Elizabeth to proclaim God's activity in her life: "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my

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106 Dt 32: 1, 3-4
spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.”

In these examples, we find those with human nature who had an experience of God, which then moved into an active response to that experience, here, in public proclamation. It is this response of expressing the experience of God which is the subject of this section.

In his discussion of mystery in Rahner’s theology, John O’Donnell, SJ, finds an important insight in the voice of the prophets or the bearers of revelation. Rahner writes that prophets are those “persons in whom the self-interpretation of this supernatural, transcendental experience and its history takes place in word and deed.... The prophet is none other than the believer who can express his transcendental experience of God correctly.” He says further that it is not just the so-called prophet who has the capacity to name truth, but all human beings: “something comes to expression in the prophets which fundamentally is present everywhere and in everyone, including ourselves.”

In our historical objectification of the experience of God in which God really communicates Godself, human history is not merely human or merely natural; rather, human history resides in supernatural transcendentality. “The historical objectification and self-interpretation of God’s transcendental self-communication, therefore, is governed by the same absolute and supernatural salvific will of God and by the same supernatural salvific

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107Is 61:1-3; Lk 4:16-30


109Rahner, Foundations, 158-159.

110Ibid., 158.
providence as that divine self-communication through which man is constituted in his concrete essence, and from out of which he enters into his most real history, into the history of this transcendental self-communication, into the history of salvation and revelation."

This thematization of the experience of God takes the recognizable forms of human expressions, language, and theology. Commenting on this aspect of Rahner's theology, Geffrey Kelly writes:

Following the advent of God's becoming known in the unreflexive, nonobjective moment of an experiential intercommunion with God's people, there begins the reflexive, categorical thematizing of this in various forms, including the Bible, Christian tradition, church teaching, and other forms related to the human attempt to cope with knowledge of the divine."

As we saw in the previous section, Rahner calls this categorical revelation, for it encompasses the dynamic of human beings' encounter with the transcendental aspect of revelation, i.e., the experience of God as Holy Mystery, and the human natural tendency to understand and to name this original experience.

Human reflections on the ongoing self-communication of God are present by virtue of humans' foundation in and ever-present relationship with God. Rahner writes of this continuous experience in the following:

The knowledge of God is ... a transcendental knowledge because man's basic and original orientation towards absolute mystery, which constitutes his fundamental experience of God, is a permanent existential of man as a spiritual subject. This means that the explicit, conceptual and thematic knowledge, which we usually think of when we speak of the knowledge of God or of proofs for God's existence, is a reflection upon man's transcendental orientation towards mystery, and some degree of reflection is always necessary."

111 Ibid., 159.


113 Rahner, Foundations, 52.
his continuity assures humans that it is possible for humans to know and to proclaim the Gospel truth even through human existence is conditioned by the vicissitudes of our particular history. We are always offered the invitation to respond "to the call of him who is first and last, present from the very origins and still present in the most distant future, committing ourselves to him in faith, hope and love, in the act of believing that this First and Last has made himself known to us and borne witness of himself to us in the love that is in Jesus Christ, the crucified and risen Lord." It is this Christ whom humans experience continually in the Church and in whose presence humans know, reflect on, conceptualize and formulate truth. This humans do through their distinctly human faculties, through historically-conditioned concepts and language, all of which is permeated by the grace of God.

In conclusion, this chapter dealt with the turn to the subject, transcendental anthropology and with human expressions of the experience of God. Rahner's thoroughgoing regard for "a recognition and a respect for the dignity of the subjective conscience in regard to truth" is a cogent approach for the contemporary person who seeks to appreciate the possibility of truth in the plural and multivalent expressions of this very truth. This subjective conscience is a determining factor in every facet of human being, and can never be eliminated. If our subjective understanding of truth takes place in changing historical settings, then truth must be proclaimed anew in every age and place in a way in which persons can truly appropriate it.

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III

The Dynamic of Continuity and Change

The two previous chapters have provided many insights into what Rahner considers an intellectually honest way for contemporary persons to appreciate the multiplicity of faith statements. First, he says that we must recognize that God is Holy Mystery and is the source, sustenance and term of human being. Second, we must understand our very human nature as being dynamically oriented towards this infinite horizon, and further, that God does not simply relate to humans in the mode of infinite horizon, but also as intimacy—God truly draws close to human beings. These reflections have necessarily been general so as to provide a framework for approaching the particular questions that emerge from the contemporary persons’ experience of God, themselves, and the world. Rahner calls contemporary persons to be cognizant of the dynamic of continuity and change, i.e., the dynamic between the truth of human being, oriented toward and fulfilled by the Holy Mystery as both infinite horizon and intimacy, and the historically conditioned situation of human being, shaping the apprehension and thematization of this truth. This dynamic pervades Rahner’s theological method and has been explored throughout this thesis.

Chapter One of this thesis offered Rahner’s understanding of mystery. God comes to human persons as Holy Mystery. Rahner recovered from scriptural and traditional sources a positive understanding of mystery as primordial, and a clear vision of the one single mystery who is God. Chapter Two further explored Rahner’s reflection on mystery by explicating his understanding of the relationship of mystery to the historicity of human beings. Chapter Two
demonstrated that humans can know the Holy Mystery in and through their own experience, i.e., they can know what is true, even though this knowing is historically conditioned. Further, it explored the context of human beings' expression of the Holy Mystery.

This chapter takes the conclusions drawn in the first two chapters and explores the development of dogma as an explicit instance of Rahner's approach to the contemporary person's query about the possibility of revealed truth in constantly changing and differentiated human contexts. The goal of this chapter is to demonstrate that what has been said about mystery and human living in relationship to revealed truth is both recognizable in a concrete phenomenon such as dogmatic development, and helpful in providing distinctions (not dualisms) to help contemporary persons appreciate more fully the meaning of dogmas generally and individually for their own life and in the life of the Church.

Rahner engaged in a significant portion of his reflection on the dynamic of continuity and change in the context of his consideration of the development of dogma. This issue is of particular importance to the way in which Rahner understands the dynamic of continuity and change, because dogma is a specific way in which we have proclaimed and preserved revelation in the life of the Church, in addition, for example, to the public worship of the Church. This chapter explores how this dynamic is operative in Rahner’s reflections on the development of dogma; it further seeks to relate this dynamic to other areas of theology.

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The heart of this discussion emerges primarily from the article “The Development of Dogma” in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 1, trans. Cornelius Ernst, OP (Baltimore: Helicon Press; London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1961), and secondarily from “Considerations on the Development of Dogma.” The Rahner corpus is filled with articles which treat the topic from various contexts. Rahner’s later articles also offer further nuancing of the development of dogma. Mary Hines examines these further developments under the following topics: Vatican II, world-church, the impact of pluralism, the role of theology, and the creed and the unity of faith. See Mary E. Hines, *The Transformation of Dogma: An Introduction to Karl Rahner on Doctrine* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1989), 80-92. Rahner’s later articles are a resource for addressing various pastoral issues as well as seeing Rahner’s own hermeneutical approach to his earlier understandings of the dynamic of continuity and change.
This chapter examines first, the basis of dogmatic development in scripture and tradition; second, how dogma relates to the previous discussion on human expressions; third, the fact of dogmatic development, particularly in contrast to classicism’s denial of the possibility of this fact; and fourth, how Rahner proposes to consider dogmatic development, that is, in the light of his reflections on revealed truth in relationship to the historicity of human existence. This chapter concludes with a reflection on how this issue of dogmatic development enables one to appreciate the dynamic between revealed truth and historicity in the context of dogma, and also of the many instances where human persons grapple with knowing, not exhausting, the mystery of God.

One of the goals of this thesis has been to demonstrate that when this dynamic is reflected upon, it enables persons to recognize God in all things—including humanity itself—and to express this transcendental experience of God ‘correctly,’ according to the earlier reference to the function of the prophet. This chapter intends to demonstrate this goal, and with it, to elucidate further the model of the dynamic of continuity and change by which Rahner realizes this goal in his theology.

1. Scripture and Tradition as the Basis for Dogmatic Development

_Theology of Scripture_—Scripture occupies a sacred and preeminent position in the life of the Christian Church. “[W]hen one designates a divine communication ‘word of God,’ one is asserting that God does truly communicate with humankind, but one asserts, too, that revelation by word of God is divine revelation which has been given expression by humans.”¹¹⁷ The

¹¹⁷ *The New Dictionary of Theology*, s.v. “Senses of Scripture,” by Wilfred Harrington, OP.
meaning of scripture then is conveyed—and, further, interpreted—through historically conditioned words and concepts. Revelation is, simply, God’s self-communication to human beings. It is this ongoing revelation which is at once primordial, positive and one, which truly has a “history” without neglecting the difference between God the Creator and human being the creature.

Rahner offers four different though interrelated aspects of revelation which help us approach scripture as revelation which is forever unchanged and unchangeable, but which is also understood by human beings in a constantly unfolding, evolving way. The four aspects of revelation are:

... (a) *historical*, that is, it is a spatio-temporal event, and thus needs a tradition that will continue to attest to it; (b) *verbal*, namely, human concepts and therefore human words are a constituent element of it; (c) *social*, not addressed solely to man's interior privacy but to the “Church” as the equally original recipient of this message, to the Church which must bear permanent witness to this now definitive revelation; (d) *eschatological*, it will not be superseded in this world by any new divine revelation.119

Together, these aspects set the parameters for understanding the dynamic of continuity and change within human existence. Both the historical and the verbal aspects concern Rahner’s understanding of the very Word of God as conditioned by history, even though the Word of God belongs to the original experience of the Spirit. The human word in scripture is inseparably intermingled with the divine word. Not only does Rahner say that the Word of God must be incarnate in historical contexts, but what must first be appreciated is that the Word of God which comes to us in scripture as *norma non normata* is itself historically conditioned. What the

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human authors of scripture write is conditioned by their own time and place—with many of the written forms having had lengthy oral traditions. The meaning of historicity is heightened because there is a prior level of interpretation present when one seeks the “Word of God” in scripture. Not only do readers and hearers of the Word of God live a historically conditioned life, but the very scriptures themselves have arisen out of historically conditioned situations. Hence, it would be incorrect to approach scripture from the point of view that God’s word is immediately perspicuous. This would deny the historical nature of scripture, as well as the historical context of the reader and hearer.

Amidst the long tradition of experience, reflection and statements about God, the world, and human being, scripture must be the measure of all subsequent utterances of faith, “since it is in Scripture that the one whole apostolic faith has been objectivated and has given itself, and laid down for all future times, its norma non normata.” Rahner sees scripture as capable of bringing human beings “again and again to a fresh recognition of the fact that all this immense sum of distinct statements of the Christian faith basically speaking expresses nothing else than an immense truth, even though one that has been explicitated throughout all levels of humans’ being; the truth namely that the absolute mystery that is, that permeates all things, upholds all things, and endures eternally, has bestowed itself as itself in an act of forgiving love upon human beings, and is experienced in faith in that ineffable experience of grace as the ultimate freedom of human beings.”

Scripture, then, provides the normative way into the mystery of God. We have in scripture—the objectivated “one whole apostolic faith” which has been “laid down for all

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120 Rahner, “Scripture and Tradition,” 1553.
times"—the basis for interpreting the mystery of God in the lived experience of the Church.

John O'Donnell writes that Rahner understands the Hebrew scriptures according to two themes in Israel's experience: "dialogical partnership with God and openness to the future and final fulfilment of this partnership." These two themes help to establish the pre-history of Jesus Christ and thereby become a part of salvation history. For Christians, then, Jesus Christ is "the final and unsurpassable 'criterion for distinguishing in the concrete history of religion between what is a human misunderstanding of the transcendental experience of God, and what is the legitimate interpretation of this experience'." O'Donnell concludes that the Incarnation—"the presence of the Holy Mystery in the humanity of Jesus"—is the central mystery of Christianity.

Jesus explicitly and fully manifests the dynamic between an unchangeable God in relationship with and incarnate in human being; he is open to transcendence and has himself interpreted revelation in a historical context. O'Donnell highlights the fact that even in this perfect dynamic relationship, God still does not come as comprehensibility; God continues to communicate Godself as Holy Mystery.

Theology of Tradition—The Second Vatican Council was a seminal moment in the reinterpretation of the relationship between scripture and tradition. As a peritus at this.

121Rahner, "Reflections on Methodology in Theology," 110.


125See Gregory Baum, OSA, "Vatican II's Constitution on Revelation: History and Interpretation."
Council, Rahner was involved in forming the theology which lay behind the documents of the Council. Within the many discussions, Rahner and many others argued for the non-coincidence of revelation and scripture. Although scripture was accepted as materially sufficient, it was meaningless without the eyes of faith. Tradition, then, must also serve as the bearer of revelation. Neither can be separated from the other, if the Word of God is to be recognized as such.

Rahner roots his understanding of tradition in the very teaching of Jesus which "contains the actuality of a unique, historical, all-determining event, and is also addressed to those who did not themselves encounter this event in space and time ('according to the flesh') but could only do so in the word of preaching." 126 The Christian faith, therefore, is founded in a concrete, historical event, even though it is ultimately grounded in the transcendent God. Because of this foundation in the event of Jesus the Christ, there is an organic quality to how we experience revelation in human history. It has become a part of human history, while it remains the incomprehensible Word of God. In other words, revelation has a historical life, even as its origins are divine, and it remains divine.

This notion of the life of revelation is important, because it challenges the theology which defines revelation solely according to fixed propositions, as though they were manna dropped whole and complete from the heavens. Rather than focus solely on propositions,

Rahner wants to emphasize the *source* and *goal* of all verbal propositions: “It is the experience (had) of Jesus Christ, inexhaustible to thought, the ever-incomprehensible mystery of God into which all propositions flow ...” 127 This understanding of revelation is crucial to how Rahner develops his theology of dogma. He submits that as we consider dogmatic development, we must be aware of the dynamic at work between the continuous pattern of revelation and the multiplicity of ways in which humans come to know and understand this word.

2. Dogmatic Expressions

Rahner says that dogma truly is “God’s self-disclosure in the human word of revelation” through grace. 128 He emphasizes that this human utterance must be through grace lest it be “necessarily degraded to an element of the self-understanding and the possibility of self-understanding of the mere creature.” 129 This degradation would also posit God as comprehensible, which circumscribes the very notion of God as Holy Mystery, rather than knowable only in God’s incomprehensibility.

Rather, Rahner proposes to understand dogma through the model elucidated in this thesis: that because human beings have been created with a transcendent spirit and elevated by the grace of God, human beings can know and express truth without exhausting it.

[The Holy Spirit] is there as the thing uttered itself and only with this can human utterance be self-utterance of God. Here we have at once that infinite openness in the closed revelation, and the dynamism of self-development, whose only limits are in the *visio beatifica* itself. It is also true ... that this self-communication of God really takes place in the human word, and not merely on the occasion of it.

127 Ibid.


129 Ibid., 12.
Human words are not merely the external occasion for a pneumatic or mystic experience of transcendence directed towards the God who is nameless.... And the divine Spirit is given in and through this word, assumed by himself, in his own infinity and concrete reality.¹³⁰

In this understanding of dogma, Rahner maintains full regard for the infinity and incomprehensibility of God and for the fact that this God truly draws near to human beings in the mode of closeness. Thus, Rahner can assert that the particular human utterance which we call dogma is formed by an "indissoluble unity, undivided and inconfused [sic],"¹³¹ between what is the self-disclosure of God and the amalgam, i.e., the human vehicle historically conditioned. He demonstrates that when expressions of the truth relate to revelation, i.e., dogmatic statements, it is really possible for these utterances to communicate the divine utterances in such a way that God is uttered, i.e., self-communicated.

Rahner’s conviction that humans can correctly thematize the experience of God yields three important insights. First, it affirms that God, who is Holy Mystery, has not only drawn close to human beings, but human beings can truly know and express this experience in truth. Second, even though humans can know and express the Holy Mystery, they can never exhaust this incomprehensibility; hence, humans are never finished saying something about God. Third, when we understand this thematization within the context of the assertions in the history of the faith, we realize that we cannot simply repeat previous statements about the faith, because such statements "are made with too little contact with the modern human sciences or even with contemporary theology."¹³² The result of presuming simply to repeat a faith statement leads to a

¹³⁰Ibid., 12-13.

¹³¹Ibid., 12.

body of teaching or faith statements which have little correlation with the experience of human beings living today. This does not render past statements useless, but qualifies them in the sense that a statement is an authentic, appropriate articulation at a given time which needs continual nuancing as we proceed through changing historical contexts.

3. The Fact of Dogmatic Development

Nowhere is Rahner’s understanding of the dynamic of continuity and change clearer or more fully expounded than in his writing on the development of dogma. Dogma is the method through which the Church “proposes truths contained in divine Revelation or having a necessary connection with them.” Just like the various mediums employed to express the experience of God, dogma truly acts as a sacramental, because “dogma fulfills the same purpose as revelation: the engagement of one’s entire person, mind, feelings, and body, in an existential encounter with truth.” While this aspect of dogma has often been lost as the primary meaning of dogma, it “needs to be recovered lest the church fall into dogmatic positivism, merely repeating formulae.”

Rahner’s concern for precisely this hazard is part of his reasoning behind proposing an intellectually honest way to speak about the development of dogma. Understanding mystery and human context has served to provide a basis for the dynamic of continuity and change as the --

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133 While dogma has its own particular claims, this section is not intended to treat dogmatic theology proper. See Hines, The Transformation of Dogma.


136 Ibid.
dynamic exists in human living; here in the development of dogma, Rahner moves into the concrete manifestation of this dynamic.

The study of the development of dogma is relatively recent in the history of the Church. It is due in large measure to the advent of the historical sciences and the explicit reflections upon historicity. Arguing for a movement beyond the philosophical system considered unchangeable for a large part of the Church’s history, Rahner bases his reflections—indeed, his most radical reflections—on the development of dogma on his investigation into the context of human being as it is grounded in the Mystery of God. In the past, Church teaching was understood in a classicist mode; that is, the Church understood the unity of faith to be “a matter of everyone subscribing to the correct formulae.” Out of this emerged an attitude in which “everything was clear and where at least anything of importance could be decided on easily, unambiguously and, above all, quickly.”

Classicist theology did not recognize the development of dogma because its very categories of universal definition of human being and propositions about God precluded development in general. Our understanding of truth was clear and unchanging because there was little reflection on history or on the concrete lived experience of human beings. When history and humanity were reflected on in classicist theology, they were often understood in a negative way. Rahner believes that such an attitude is no longer appropriate, given today’s understanding of historicity, plurality of philosophical systems, and human knowing. Rahner is cautious, however, to avoid the opposite danger of relativism. Because Rahner is seriously concerned about bringing the Gospel message into harmony with both tradition and contemporary historical

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contexts, his theology has profound implications for understanding the formulae of the Church today.

Rahner’s article, “The Development of Dogma,” offers an initial approach to understanding how it is that revealed truth undergoes an evolution in human history. The first part of this article is intended to indicate the fact of dogmatic development. Rahner includes this section in order to meet the objections of the classicist mindset which does not assume dogmatic development as a given. Rahner’s approach acknowledges the “cracking” of the classicist system and introduces theological reflection based on the human experience of the ongoing communication of God in mystery. The thrust of Rahner’s argument is the need to approach the notion of the development of dogma, not from the starting point of propositions about God, nor of the nature of history, but from the human experience of God.

4. Starting Points for Considering Dogmatic Development

One of the primary goals of this section is to examine the method by which classicist theologians have understood the formulation and reformulation of dogmas. Rahner wants not only to propose a new starting point for understanding the development of dogma, but to dismantle the classicist approach in the light of new (and, often, reclaimed) notions of the human person. The first section, then, presents Rahner’s attempt to show that the very propositions that classicism proclaims as fixed truth statements are themselves a development from the original experience of Jesus Christ. In so doing, he begins to articulate his own starting point for considering the development of dogma. The second section presents Rahner’s more radical reflection on

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138 Rahner, “Theology and the Church's Teaching Authority After the Council,” 86.
development of dogma, as he proposes that the starting point of considering development of dogma is not in propositions about God, but in the human experience of the mystery of God.

**Propositions about God**—Rahner examines the notion of Revelation as it is understood in the context of the Church’s pronouncement that Revelation is closed upon the death of the last apostle. Rahner makes his argument not just to point to the fact of development or the persistence of identity amidst change, but for the development of dogma, the Word of faith that is binding on the Church.

Rahner understands Revelation primarily as a happening, a relationship between God and human being. God’s Revelation has to do with God’s giving of Godself to the world—definitively in Jesus the Christ. Any and all propositions flow from and return to this truth: “Revelation is a saving happening, and only then and in relation to this a communication of ‘truths.’” Chapter One of this thesis asserted this by examining Rahner’s distinction between *mysteria* and *mysterium stricte dictum*. Chapter Two examined this *mysterium* as the basis of God’s relationship with human beings which then characterized human living as an “incomprehensible venture” which does not dispel, but heightens the mystery.

In this context, it would not follow that Revelation would resemble fixed or isolated propositions. God does not subtract from or add to Revelation because God is ever in relationship with human beings. Revelation is—simply—the “transcendental relation between man and God which is constituted by God’s self-communication. This communication is supernatural, grace-given, but made to every mind inescapably and always, and can itself rightly

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139 Ibid., 48; emphasis mine.
be called revelation.” Rahner further notes that Revelation can only occur through the mediation of human history. It is at this point—human history—that the single and continuous communication of God’s self receives multiple and changing interpretations and expressions.

It becomes clear, then, that Rahner’s understanding of a closed Revelation is based in the fact that nothing new can be said after the definitive offer of Godself in the Christ. Further, the experience of the Apostles is considered a formal part of the history of Revelation because they experienced God immediately in the person of Jesus the Christ. While they were perhaps the first Christian theologians as they carried on the oral tradition, they had what later Christians did not: the immediate, historical presence of Jesus the Christ. What later Christians do have is the promise of Christ’s continual presence and guidance through the Holy Spirit; that is, Christ will always be present in the Church.

The point of Rahner’s discussion on a closed Revelation is to underscore the notion of Revelation as a Happening. This then sets the basis for proposing that particular propositions of faith that we have made throughout history participate in this Happening. Such propositions do not merely follow as a logical deduction from a previous one; rather, Rahner proposes that the Church makes these propositions in living contact with the thing itself. We have, then, the


141 Rahner later explores more thoroughly the importance of the Apostles experience as he moves into the consideration of the development of dogma not from propositions, but from experience. See Rahner, “The Development of Dogma,” 65-68. In this section Rahner formulates the criterion of original experience of Christ which is connected to later experiences of Christ which is the principle which Rahner is articulating above.

142 While it is not within the scope of this thesis to examine Rahner’s theology of Church, it is important to recognize its importance in the context of the development of dogma. This is because the magisterium and the sensus fidelium derive their authority from this promise of Christ to lead and guide the people of God and to safeguard the depositum fidei.

tradition from which to make new formulae and the continual experience of God revealing Godself—both of which have to do with the one single communication of God's self. Rahner refers to the "light of faith" which is given to the Church and which positively influences it in the "development and unfolding of the original treasures of faith."\footnote{Ibid., 52.}

What follows from this is that each proposition must be understood within the context of the body of propositions. An individual proposition cannot say everything about what was experienced as Revelation. It may do so in more or less agreement with other propositions. On the one hand, Rahner clearly says is that one can "know" revealed truth even if it cannot be articulated well enough. This proceeds from the experience of God. And yet, on the other hand, Rahner wants to say that something of Revelation is communicated in these human expressions. He compares this to the natural order in which

... there undoubtedly occur many cases in which we know something with complete certainty in an unreflective, 'global' way, where on the one hand the reflexive proof in fact offered for it could still be found very loose and inadequate (as 'merely probable'); and on the other hand a more stringent proof, the possibility of which must be accepted in principle, is all the same going to be produced or has already been produced to the satisfaction of some more penetrating thinker.\footnote{Ibid., 54.}

Rahner then asks the question of the precise relationship between a formerly articulated truth and the "new" formula: How is it that "later knowledge is contained in the earlier or not?"\footnote{Ibid.} Rahner begins with the starting point of classicist theology which examines the notion of one single proposition contained in Revelation. This single proposition is then stated more

\footnote{Ibid.}
expressly in formulae which say ‘the same thing’ as the original proposition.\textsuperscript{147}

To demonstrate his point, Rahner employs a distinction between what is “virtually implicit” and what is “formally implicit.” Again, Rahner’s dialogue partners are the persons who asserted that a proposition developed according to what was formally implicit in the previous one(s). Rahner believes that this only really amounts to a restatement of the previous proposition(s), and wonders why the first was not simply maintained. Rahner introduces the notion of the virtually implicit in order to suggest that there is more to the development of dogma than a formal restating of previous formulae. Rahner will say that even though the Church understood “new” dogma according to what was formally implicit, really what it has actually been doing is developing dogma by what was virtually implicit in previous propositions.

Rahner argues in the following way. He points out that many of the Church’s propositions are not immediately and formally connected to scripture and the original experience of the Christ. Transubstantiation—no doubt a central article of faith as articulated within classicism—cannot be formally implied without taking “arbitrary and violent measures.”\textsuperscript{148} Yet, this term belongs to the tradition of the Church. To make sense of this, Rahner says that such a claim developed more as virtually implicit in scripture and the original experience than as formally implicit. Although in reality it is difficult to distinguish the two, Rahner still makes such a distinction to open up our understanding of development. There is a connection between prior and subsequent formulae which cannot in fact be limited to the formally implicit. Further, because there is another dynamic at work, namely, the virtually implicit, we can rightly say that these subsequent formulae are truly \textit{Revelation} and not merely human statement guaranteed by

\textsuperscript{147}Ibid., 57-58.
the Church. When God utters a Word, God is capable of seeing every possible unfolding of this Word in human history.

Rahner then compares the expressions of God with those of humans to show the similarities and differences. This distinction highlights the inexhaustible, incomprehensible word which is enunciated by human words. Human expressions will always be inadequate even as they truly express God’s word: “We always begin by talking ‘above our heads’. The whole of what we ‘really’ state is not an expression of what we ourselves want to state.” When God expresses something, God truly communicates it; in contrast, when humans express their experience of God’s communication, their expressions only asymptotically approach what God has said.

Such an understanding of Revelation allows Rahner to articulate two important principles in the development of dogma. First, the entire body of dogmatic propositions must be held together in unity so as to guard against taking them in an isolated manner and thus inadequately. Rahner points to the interrelatedness of all dogmatic formulae. His insight into understanding the one mystery of God, and the multiple propositional articulations of mysteries which flow from the one, elucidates this particular principle. Second, Rahner’s understanding justifies multiple propositions and their development through their relationship with the single mystery of God and the internal dynamic which relates one formulation to the next; these can still be called Revelation. The truth expressed in these propositions remains continuous based on the constant

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148 Ibid., 60.

149 Ibid., 61.

150 Cornelius Ernst notes that Rahner will later say that to a certain extent, human expressions also contain this “inclusive” character of divine expressions. Ibid., footnote 1.
relationship of God to human beings, and the graced capacity of human beings to know and express this truth.

What Rahner has done up to this point is to take the approach of the classicists and show how their very method in restating formulae illustrates development of dogma. Rahner based this on an understanding of Revelation as happening, rather than as a static communication of a fixed number and content of propositions. What Rahner is also doing is setting the foundation for proposing a more radical approach to considering the notion of development of dogma. That approach is to begin with the human experience of the mystery of God. This is where Rahner truly offers something new.

_The Experience of the Mystery of God_—In examining Rahner’s more radical reflection, we can revisit a quotation used in the first chapter of this thesis which again marks movement out of classicist understandings and into an understanding based on the human experience of the mystery of God.

What if we must take the mystery not as the provisional but as the primordial and permanent, so much so that the absence or disregard of mystery, preoccupation with the seemingly known and perspicuous proves to be the provisional, which dissolves before the gradual revelation of the abiding mystery, as such, to the finite reason? What if there be an ‘unknowing’, centred on itself and the unknown, which when compared with knowledge, that is, with any knowledge not really aware of itself, is not a pure negation, not simply an empty absence, but a positive characteristic of a relationship between one subject and another? What if it be essential and constitutive of true knowledge, of its growth, self-awareness and lucidity, to include precisely the unknown, to know itself orientated from the start to the incomprehensible and inexpressible, to recognize more and more that only in this way can it truly be itself and not be halted at a regrettable limit?"^{151}

\[^{151}\text{Rahner, “The Concept of Mystery,” 41.}\]
When we consider the development of dogma—or, more generally, the dynamic of continuity and change—we must start with the very present reality of my, i.e., the subject’s, experience of God. God is in constant relationship with human beings. We do not have to reflect simply on the event of Jesus the Christ and the experience that the Apostles had of this event. We do not have to rely simply on previous propositions of that experience. God’s revealing of God’s self is not past tense. It is the homogenous process of past, present and future which seeks to say the same thing even as it is expressed in constantly changing ways.

Rahner introduces the notion of experience as the basis for understanding the development of dogma through an illustration:

[A] young man has the genuine and vital experience of a great love, an experience which transforms his whole being. This love may have presuppositions (of a metaphysical, psychological and physiological kind) which are simply unknown to him. His love itself is his ‘experience’; he is conscious of it, lives through it with the entire fullness and depth of a real love. He ‘knows’ more about it than he can ‘state’.

The parallel which Rahner is drawing is the human experience of God. Like love, the experience of God is genuine and vital and transforms one’s entire being. The offer of God’s very self is like the offer of love: it changes you however you respond to the offer. The human person ‘knows’ much more about the experience of God than she or he can ‘state.’ What Rahner is saying in this parallel is twofold. First, the experience is inexhaustible; that is, no subsequent reflection or thematization or statement can adequately express the original, unthematic experience. Second, it is really possible to ‘know’ God through an experience of God even though the thematization of the experience of God is always inadequate. The original experience


153To explore further this statement, see Rahner, “The Experience of God Today,” 149-165.
will always be more than what can be stated about it.

The lover knows of his love: this knowledge of himself forms an essential element in the very love itself. The knowledge is infinitely richer, simpler and denser than any body of propositions about the love could be. Yet this knowledge never lacks a certain measure of reflexive articulateness: the lover confesses his love at least to himself, "states" at least to himself something about his love.\textsuperscript{154}

The more one reflects on the original experience, Rahner says, the more fully this love comprehends itself. Such subsequent reflection is absolutely necessary as love comes to realize itself. Thus, while Rahner asserts the primacy and irreplaceability of the original experience, he also asserts the necessity of reflection as the way in which to possess more fully the inexhaustible fullness of the original experience.

While propositions are important, they, too, emerge from an experience. In "Considerations on the Development of Dogma," Rahner says that God's self-communication is not simply a reality to be reflected on or restated; rather, it is to be experienced. And yet, such limited, inadequate human statements are necessary because humans cannot at this time come to a "wordless possession and experience of the divine reality itself" because "in the word the thing itself is given."\textsuperscript{155}

There exists a necessary tension between God's Word and the human person's attempt to express God's Word. While the simplicity of God's Word can never adequately be expressed nor the experience of the Apostles relived, Rahner says that humans must still seek to possess the fullness of Apostolic times, i.e., the integrated experience of receiving the Word of God in the historical person of Jesus, even though this must happen in a different way according to every

\textsuperscript{154}Rahner, "The Development of Dogma," 64.

age and "its mode of consciousness in faith."\footnote{156}

Rahner concludes this section by saying that "there exists today as in history the connexion between what is implicit as a living possession of the whole truth in an unreflexive but conscious way, and what is always only partially explicit in propositions."\footnote{157} The second chapter of this thesis elucidated this by understanding human expressions of God to be based in the incomprehensible, inexhaustible God who nonetheless allows Godself to be incarnated in human realities. In this section of "The Development of Dogma" Rahner says that any attempt to express the content of a revealed truth necessarily distinguishes that expression from the truth because of the truth's inexhaustibility:

... its reflexive interpretation does not allow us to state adequately and exhaustively all that is concomitantly stated and known in it and all that is not.... The proposition is always a kind of window through which a view may be gained of the thing itself, and implies in its full sense (as Communication) this view of the thing through the proposition (in its 'stated' sense).\footnote{158}

In the proposition, one hears "not just its more or less definable minimum content, but concomitantly all that further content of the speaker's unreflexive awareness not yet propositionally objectified; and he hears it as something known to the speaker."\footnote{159} Because of this, propositions can, in fact, carry more than the limited words or concepts which they must necessarily employ. Rahner gives the example of the statement "Christ died for us." On one level, this statement provides the obvious information of Christ's "physiological exit" from this world. But, at the same time, what is stated is the whole human experience of death which can

\footnote{156}Rahner, "The Development of Dogma," 67.

\footnote{157}Ibid., 68.

\footnote{158}Ibid., 69.

\footnote{159}Ibid., 70.
never be fully articulated.\textsuperscript{160}

In Rahner's understanding of development of dogma, then, propositions are intimately connected to the original experience of the Christ through the Apostles and now through the ongoing activity of the Holy Spirit. Because this experience is concomitant with the articulation or hearing of a proposition, \textit{more} is communicated than the words used to signify this experience. The words cannot contain the original experience and yet they are necessary vehicles for communicating and for more fully possessing that experience.

Because this is so, Rahner says that we can speak of a basic or unifying conception which underlies or which "co-signifies" the multiplicity of expressions of Revelation: "The immediately intelligible and express statements of Revelation in its manifold variety ... are heard and questioned with a view to discovering what is compresent to mind and communicated by them, that is, their background and the principle which comprehends the whole of this variety and gives it unity."\textsuperscript{161}

It is this basic conception which gives content to the notion of continuity in the dynamic of continuity and change. Continuity has to do with the "more than" which is communicated in propositions. It does not consist of the mere proliferation of a certain phrase or concept or even of a particular philosophical system. The Word of God is, simply, beyond that.

Rahner concludes by saying that we can indeed assert that development of dogma occurs because it has, in fact, occurred through God's continuous self-communication in the age of the Apostles and in our time today. This ongoing communication permits us to assert \textit{really} that Revelation continues to be proclaimed in constantly new contexts. Rahner says that this is so

\textsuperscript{160}ibid. 72.
... precisely because (from God’s point of view) the God who speaks surveys in himself from the very beginning all the virtualities of his speech, and by his own Spirit in the Church inspires, guides and watches over their very actualization; and because from the point of view of men and their properly human words and propositions, even in human speech more is actually communicated formally than can formally be stated.  

Finally, Rahner recognizes that the development of dogma can only really be made sense of through the heart of faith and as a member of the believing consciousness of the Church. It is the task of the theologian to continue to relate explicitly the original experience of the Christ with the now two-thousand-year tradition of the Church. There will, of course, be constant tension because, like the example of the young man’s love, expressions or propositions will always pale in comparison to that original experience of love, even as those expressions are themselves sacramentals of that experience.

5. Dogmatic Development in Terms of the Dynamic of Continuity and Change

Rahner’s consideration of the development of dogma offers contemporary persons a way to assent critically and faithfully to the entire body of faith assertions. That is, persons can recognize that dogmatic statements are the revealed word of God, but as human statements, they are co-mingled with historically conditioned formulations.

Rahner’s understanding that dogma develops, and, more generally, that human utterances about God, themselves and the world, undergo change even as they are true, is important in appreciating the dynamic of continuity and change. If there were no development, there would

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161Ibid., 73.
162Ibid., 74.
be no reason for a history.

At the heart of the development of dogma is a “persistent identity”\textsuperscript{164} which remains unchanged throughout human history. This “living spirit” goes through a process of development which “here appears in its authentic form in a solitary instance.”\textsuperscript{165} That is, while there may be many formulae, endless reflections, etc., each truly signifies one reality. For Rahner, this reality is clearly and unambiguously the event of the Christ. In this event, Rahner says, we have “a homogeneous process of which there is just one instance.”\textsuperscript{166}

Because truth undergoes a \textit{process}, its full and exact meaning cannot be known until the end of the historical process, even though its meaning is continually unveiled. For example, while early Christians grasped the truth that Jesus of Nazareth was the Christ, the anointed one foretold by the prophets, they did not possess that truth as fully as did later generations. The truth is not different in either case (hence, it is \textit{homogeneous}); however, the degree of \textit{possession}, i.e., understanding of its meaning, has changed and deepened. Rahner clearly places an emphasis on the notion of process: “It is in the very act of developing, and not in any prior reflexion, that the living reality of the Church’s consciousness in faith comes progressively into a fuller possession of itself.”\textsuperscript{167}

The notion of homogeneity as it is used here by Rahner is given fuller meaning when we reflect upon his concept of primordial mystery. In Chapter One, we looked at how Rahner examines the locus of the many mysteries in the one single mystery, \textit{mysterium stricte dictum},

\textsuperscript{164}Rahner, ““The Development of Dogma,” 39.
\textsuperscript{165}Ibid., 41.
\textsuperscript{166}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{167}Ibid., 42.
which is God. In a parallel way, Rahner suggests here that the persistent identity that binds
formula upon formula is the original, single event of the Christ, which he sums up in the
following way: “the unique historical fortune of the Gospel of Christ under the direction of that
Spirit which leads us into all truth, from the time of Christ himself to the moment when by his
return faith will be transformed into the vision of God, face to face.”\(^{168}\)

Because the event of the Christ is itself a participation in the mystery of God, its full
meaning for human history cannot be known, because this meaning is as inexhaustible as God.
The content of the single truth is the mystery of God. Thus, even here in the discussion of
dogma, one must leave room for the incomprehensible God and for the inadequate, sin-tainted
articulations of human beings as they come to possess truth more fully.

Were humans capable of fully comprehending the mystery of God, development would
not need to take place; precisely because God remains mystery, development must take place as
humans ever more plumb this mystery. Within the development itself is the one, single instance
of truth which neither changes nor ceases to exist. And yet, because “human statements, even
those in which faith expresses God’s saving truths, are finite,” development must necessarily
occur in order that humans come to understand more deeply the truth.\(^{169}\)

This does not render past formulae false or meaningless even though these formulae can
be replaced or surpassed. Rahner says that the change occurs in the material realm and not the
spiritual realm.\(^{170}\) That is, while human understanding of truth changes, the truth itself does not
change. Thus, we carry today what has gone before us. Our philosophy, our theology, our

\(^{168}\)Ibid.

\(^{169}\)Ibid., 43.

\(^{170}\)Ibid., 45.
culture, etc., bear “the undeniable stamp of our time, while we continually learn anew” from all that has gone before us. The content of this change is positive: “If we fail to preserve or to change, we should betray the truth, either by falling into error or by failing to make the truth our own in a really existential way.” This is the problem which Rahner continually addresses: to steer between the dangers of relativism and classicism, neither of which are appropriate for honestly understanding and expressing the truth today.

Rahner says that the purpose, then, of elucidating the fact of the development of dogma is to ensure that human beings appropriate, or possess ever more fully, the truth in their concrete historical experience. “The human mind,” writes Rahner, “is not like a photographic plate.” It cannot take in and reproduce data without preference or alteration. In order to understand that with which she or he is confronted, the human person

... must react, take up a stand, bring the new experience into connexion with what he already knows or has been affected by or dealt with, the whole historical sum of his experience. He must find a place for his own reality, his own life and conduct in the order of divine truth, and direct his life accordingly.... And so he can never abstract from what he is, from his ever new, changing historical reality.

Further, Rahner ascribes a positive value to the human need to “translate” new experiences into their own context. This existential characteristic of the human being is just as important as the human’s “unchangeable metaphysical ‘entity’” in understanding and expressing the experience

171 Ibid.
172 Ibid.
173 Ibid., 44.
174 Ibid., 44-45.
of God.¹⁷⁵ Christ uses the totality of human being to lead the Church "sometimes by new ways, through a changing reality to his own single Truth."¹⁷⁶ This is the basis by which Rahner moves the understanding of the development of dogma from classicist presumptions to a basis in the experience of God rather than propositions about God.

Christian revelation certainly claims to be God's word, to be addressed by God to man, a word which does not depend upon any historically conditioned perspectives of human understanding as its prior condition, a word which in its message goes beyond all such perspectives, and in which that which we call the grace of faith itself creates the true perspectives of understanding for that which God wills to utter to man as his word in the form of human words. Nevertheless it is still not the case that the perspectives of understanding which are developed in human history and subject to change have no significance for the manner in which divine revelation is communicated and comes to be understood.... [D]ivine revelation has a history of its own such that neither the content nor the mode of revelation remain always the same.¹⁷⁷

While we cannot ever come up with a definitive understanding of the dynamic of continuity and change because human history has not yet come to its end, we can use the principles articulated in the development of dogma as ways of becoming aware of the dynamic of continuity and change that is inherent to who we are as persons who stand before the Living God.

Our relationship to God is based in the experience we have of God and the experience of our forbears—the communion of saints who have carried on the original experience of the Christ through the Holy Spirit. Rahner says that we must continually have recourse to this original experience and use it as a critical measure in discerning the dynamic of continuity and change.

¹⁷⁵Ibid., 45.

¹⁷⁶Ibid.

The reflections on the development of dogma in terms of continuity and change are also present in other areas of Rahner's theology. For example, in his article "Christian Living Yesterday and Today," Rahner concerns himself with "that element in Christian living which endured unchanged yesterday, today and tomorrow." He expands on this concern in the following paragraphs:

To assert that there is an underlying element in Christian living which remains the same in spite of all the differences between the new and the old in it, and in spite of all historical vicissitudes, necessarily implies that this element has survived unchanged because it has been preserved as an historical heritage in the form in which it has de facto developed. Perhaps we could actually go so far as to say that today the real nonconformists are to be found in the group of those who have a genuine, calm and loving respect for the religious heritage of the past and the experience of past generations - such at least is one impression when one observes the feverish excitement of many over-zealous individuals.

Many instances of such institutional practices of devotion, even such as were or are common to the entire Church ... may be susceptible of change, and may actually need it. Such changes in fact the official Church has already undertaken in many cases.... Why should there not be continuity between past and future in that the custom of having established usages which are Christian and human could be discovered and practised afresh? Are the students who make pilgrimages from Paris to Chartres simply engaged in a piece of sentimental folklore? Or can there not still be some meaning in such practices in the future too, even though - or perhaps because - such pilgrimages are very different in form and manner from the pilgrimage of a Polish peasant woman to Tschenstochau?

All these institutional practices in Christian living are subject to manifold kinds of change. Thank God such changes are actually made. But change is something quite different from demolition and atrophy.

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179 Ibid.

180 Ibid., 10.
In these passages, the elements of continuity and change\textsuperscript{181} become clear only as they are in relationship with one another and in a particular context, e.g., Christian living. This relationship has to do directly with the relationship of God to human being.

In the old and in the new, however, one element must be the same, which survives yesterday, today and for ever, and of which we have not been able to speak enough: God the incomprehensible source of life's blessing, the mystery of the crucified and risen Christ, God the incomprehensible source of life's blessing, the mystery of the crucified and risen Christ, the blessing which extends its holiness in and through all the monotony of everyday life, the hope for that eternal life which consists in the unveiling of God in his incomprehensibility. Where this is present and living there is a Christian, and that Christian is living his faith. This is true of the future also.

It is here in this passage that Rahner explicitly bases the dynamic of continuity and change in the mystery of God as God is present in human living. The first three chapters of this thesis established that mystery has a very powerful and positive content and also affects how humans express themselves, the world, and God. Thus, the dynamic of continuity and change relies upon the incomprehensibility of God and the inexhaustible ways to experience and express this incomprehensibility.

Rahner speaks similarly about the dynamic of continuity and change in the context of the Church in his article "Basic Observations on the Subject of Changeable and Unchangeable Factors in the Church." In relation to continuity, Rahner writes the following: "there is an abiding corpus of dogma in the Church, an interpretation of basic moral attitudes which has a permanent validity in Christian life (in other words an abiding Christian ethic) and a valid and permanent constitutional law of the Church."\textsuperscript{182} It is this continuity which is set in the human

\textsuperscript{181}Rahner directs the reader to a more thorough explanation of 'change' in 'Kirche im Wandel', \textit{Schriften zur Theologie} VI (Einsiedeln, 1965), 455-478; \textit{Das Konzil - ein neuer Beginn} (Freiburg, 1966).

\textsuperscript{182}Rahner, "Basic Observations on the Subject of Changeable and Unchangeable Factors in the Church," 5.
context of change—i.e., "that which we immediately experience and make living contact with"—
and is distinguished from this change through discernment of spirits.183 Rahner says that the
continuity, or unchangeability, is often the more hidden of the two, although it, too, is relatively
apprehensible.

Examples, such as those from these two articles, are present throughout Rahner's
writings—each continually expounding the proposition that "identity survives in change;"184 that
the "historical permanence of revelation exist[s] in ever new encounters and transforming
everything into itself, with a spatio-temporal position in time;"185 that humans "are pilgrims who
seek the eternal homeland of truth in a constantly new exodus."186

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183 Ibid., 7.
184 Rahner, "On the Concept of Infallibility in Catholic Theology," 84.
186 Karl Rahner, "Ignatius of Loyola Speaks to a Modern Jesuit" in Ignatius of Loyola with P. Imhof
(London: Collins, 1979), 32.
Conclusion

The conclusion of this thesis affirms Rahner's conviction that, while human existence is characterized by plural and multivalent expressions of revealed truth, it remains primarily and ultimately oriented towards the one, single mystery who is God. Rahner illustrates this throughout his theology in his constant attention to God as Holy Mystery and to human beings as persons who know God as both infinite and intimate. In his teaching on the development of dogma, Rahner offers an example of how an appreciation of these two considerations can provide contemporary persons an intellectually honest account of both revealed truth and the historicity of our experience and expression of that truth. He affirms that human expressions of revealed truth are necessarily not exhaustive by virtue of the fact that God as Holy Mystery cannot be exhausted in human concepts, reflections or expressions. He also affirms that humans can really express revealed truth, even though their apprehension and expression of that truth is historically conditioned. For Rahner, this is assured by the very constitution of human being as made by, guided by, and directed towards the incomprehensible mystery as the very fulfillment of their humanity, i.e., as the source of salvation.

Based on his considerations of God as Holy Mystery and of human beings as persons who know God as both infinite and intimate, Rahner recognizes the capacity of faith statements to communicate revealed truth, even as they are historically conditioned.

In the very nature of things this summing up of the whole affords no one fixed point of reference, no factor by which its nature can be unambiguously
recognised, understood and determined, and on the basis of which it can be defined and expressed. It is precisely because it is the absolute truth that is in man that must find expression here (but that truth considered precisely as the original and indefinable mystery) that what is expressed is necessarily obscure.... For this reason, we have a sense of the 'inexactitude' of all theological statements, a sense that all can be called in question as to their precise meaning by a thousand other ideas, approaches or fresh problems which they raise, and can thereby be assigned to the already immense class of ideas which have not been fully thought out or reflected upon.  

Rahner finds that appreciating God as Holy Mystery, which is primordial to understanding human existence, is the key to reconciling the plurality and inexactitude of faith statements, because they ultimately have meaning only when they point to this one enduring mystery. He says that one "who takes all these statements in this sense thereby ceases to be anxious on the grounds that we do not have a sufficiently exact knowledge of what is meant by them, that no explanation of them turns out to be thoroughly clear and unambiguous, and on the grounds that perhaps it is precisely he who appears to contest them who succeeds in penetrating to their true meaning."  

There will always be disputes, questions, and confusions around individual faith statements because historicity really is a part of those statements. What Rahner has shown is that we can be aware that in these faith statements there are these two intermingled elements of historicity and revealed truth, and that statements more or less accurately account for revealed truth depending on the context of the hearer of those statements. However, even inaccurate or disputed faith statements can be an opportunity for grace.

For it is a fact of experience that even a formulation which is disputed can, without actually being a matter of indifference, truly direct us to the indefinable mystery of God, and that the truth of one's own tenets does not imply that the

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188 Ibid.
tenets of another, even when they are false, may not serve in the concrete to lead that other to a point at which he accepts the mystery of God in a spirit of adoration and love.  

Rahner believes that one of theology’s tasks is to assist contemporary persons in their understanding of faith statements primarily by being a “living and courageous mystagogy” into the core experience of grace.” He further says:

Theology must plunge into its deepest source, its slender root, its origins, before it burgeons into the various branches of knowledge. It must explore the fine point of the person’s spirit which has been lovingly drawn, illuminated, and embraced by mystery. It must center upon the boundary between the human person and loving mystery.

It is precisely that boundary between the human person and loving mystery that this thesis has sought to explore, so as to understand more fully the everyday events of a person’s life which bring together more explicitly the dynamic between revealed truth and historicity. for the experience of God is always present in the deeply earthy and mundane moments, the rugged prose of every day life. Human beings utilize many mediums in order to express this experience. Treatises, hieroglyphics, body movement, philosophies, stories and painting are just some of the ways in which people have expressed their experience of God. At the root of these expressions is a certain power to engage the imagination by recognizing the transcendent, the alluring mystery, in the concrete, human matter at hand. For this reason, Rahner’s theology has been labeled a

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189 Ibid., 66.


191 Commenting on the difficulties inherent in living religious life, Justina Reilly, IHM wrote: “Do not think I am sitting here to pass away the time telling you that religious life is poetry. It is the roughest kind of prose.” Sister M. Rosalita, IHM, No Greater Service: The History of the Congregation of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Monroe, Michigan (Detroit, 1948).
“theology of the everyday,” for he delves deeply into understanding the human capacity to be open to the infinite ways in which God manifests Godself in the world.

It is clear that extensive consideration of practical implications are necessary in this area—indeed in all theological endeavors. A considered look at the particular details of each issue must be included when addressing any issue where revealed truth and historicity come into question. As this thesis has expounded, Karl Rahner maintains that when one recognizes that God the Holy Mystery is the basis of human existence, that human beings experience and know this Holy Mystery in their concrete, historically conditioned contexts, and that the thematization of this experience can really be true in its changing formulations, then one can better appreciate what the truth is and how it can be appropriated in new contexts.
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