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KARL RAHNER AND THE PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

Karl Rahner is undoubtedly one of the most prominent systematic theologians of the 20th century. Far less, however – especially with the passage of time – is known even among theologians that he also made an important contribution to the theory of science in the discipline of pastoral theology, primarily through the leading conception and edition of the “Handbuch der Pastoraltheologie”, which was published in the years 1964 to 1972 in five volumes (resp. six subvolumes) by Herder Verlag, Freiburg in Breisgau (Arnold et al., 1964-1972)¹. But this is closely related to Rahner’s fundamental interest in pastoral issues. His preoccupation with the problems of practical theology is not to be seen as an erratic block within his work but as a continuation of his consistently practice-oriented theology. According to Karl Lehmann, his close working colleague and assistant at the University of Munich, dogmatic, spirituality and pastoral care are to be understood as “an ever-living triangular relationship” in Rahner’s work (Lehmann, 2004, p. 3).

When Rahner had published the anthology “Sendung und Gnade” in 1959, in which he had already presented explicitly “contributions to Pastoral Theology” (so the subtitle) (Rahner, 1988), the Herder publishing house asked him for his thoughts on a practical theological handbook. In November 1960, the Innsbruck theologian presented a draft with the title “Über Plan und Aufbau eines Handbuchs der Pastoraltheologie“ (i.e. “about the plan and structure of a handbook of pastoral theology”) to potential co-workers at the Herder publishing house for appraisal

¹ See the (nearly) complete edition of Rahner’s works: Lehmann et al., 1995-2018. Rahner’s essays from the “Handbuch der Pastoraltheologie” as well as on the foundation of pastoral theology (see below) are contained in volume 19 („Selbstvollzug der Kirche. Ekklesiologische Grundlegung praktischer Theologie“, 1995). Cf. August Laumer, 2010. Rahner preferred the term practical theology, while Franz Xaver Arnolf insisted on pastoral theology. Finally, an agreement was reached on the compromise title, which combines both names. Ibid., p. 286f.

(Laumer, 2010, p. 143-175). In this typewritten manuscript,² he already outlines the central concerns of a renewal of the discipline, as they were later implemented in the “Handbuch der Pastoraltheologie”. This early draft, as well as the contributions in the handbook itself and three other essays that appeared between 1966 and 1969 (Rahner, 1966, p. 285-309; Rahner, 1968, p. 48-64; Rahner, 1969, p. 617-638), show in great continuity how Rahner understood the discipline of pastoral theology.

1. RAHNER'S CONCEPTION OF PASTORAL THEOLOGY

In the 1960 concept, after introductory remarks, Rahner gives a comprehensive definition of pastoral theology:

In this draft of a handbook presented here, the PTh [pastoral theology] is understood as that theological (that is, scooping from the sources of revelation, standardized by the magisterium, preceding methodically, building up systematically, using secular knowledge like any other theological discipline) science which, according to the scientific, namely theological analysis of the concrete (and legally not yet adequately captured) respective situation of the church, develops the principles (and as far as possible concretizes them into imperatives) according to which the church actualizes her own essence in this particular (i.e. present) situation and thus performs her activity of salvation. (Rahner, 1960, p. 4f; cf. Lehmann, 1995-2018, vol. 19, p. 6f)

This complex definition has two main components: On the one hand the church, on the other hand the respective present situation in which the church actualizes her enduring essence.³ If one wants to briefly summarize Rahner's concept of the discipline and bring it down to a short formulation that goes back to himself, then one can say: He sees pastoral theology as the theological science of the church's self-fulfilment, which has ever now been abandoned.⁴ Rahner interprets

2 The 38-page manuscript „Über Plan und Aufbau eines Handbuches der Pastoraltheologie“ is preserved in the Karl-Rahner-Archiv, Munich (KRA I F 291a). Parts of it (p. 21-33) are included in Lehmann, 1995-2018, vol. 19, p. 30-34.

3 The distinction between “principles” and “imperatives” that Rahner had worked out in an earlier study (Rahner, 1957, p. 325-339; then with two other essays once again published in: Rahner 1965; included in: Lehmann, 1995-2018, vol. 10, p. 322-420) is explicitly assumed here in this definition; in fact, however, he hardly refers to it in his further explanations, and the boundaries between the two terms are even noticeably blurred. The differentiation between “principles” and “imperatives” can therefore be neglected here.

4 Cf. e. g. Lehmann, 1995-2018, vol. 19, p. 21 (resp. Arnold, 1964-1972, vol 1, p. 93): „Die praktische Theologie als wissenschaftliche theologische Lehre über den je jetzt aufgegebenen Vollzug der Kirche“.

this present situation (the “ever now”) as an immediate and inevitable call from God to his church. Once again, in another way but also briefly, Rahner himself formulates in the last volume of the “Handbuch der Pastoraltheologie”, the final lexicon volume of the compendium (in the article “Pastoraltheologie”): “What must the church do today? This question encompasses the whole task of practical theology.” (Arnold, 1964-1972, vol. 5, p. 394; Lehmann, 1995-2018, vol. 19, p. 490f)⁵. Therefore according to Rahner, the basic theme and object of pastoral theology is what the required fulfillment of the essence of the church in the respective present situation is.

In order to understand this adequately, the implications contained in Rahner’s definition of pastoral theology have to be noted, especially in his understanding of the church as well as the present situation:

- The basic premise for Rahner’s definition of pastoral theology is the thesis that a being realizes its essence in space and time and that this actualization of the essence belongs to this essence of the being itself (and does not have just an accidental character and thus, as it were, exists separately from it). The church therefore necessarily actualizes her – permanently given – essence in the respective history. She has to make it happen; because that is fundamental to her nature. Rahner calls this realization, this necessary historical actualization of her being, “Selbstvollzug“ (“self-fulfillment”).
- This ecclesial self-fulfillment is the object, the “Materialobjekt“ (“material object”) of practical theology. Therefore, this discipline is basically a science of the church; pastoral theology is conceived here as an ecclesiological science. In this vein, Rahner later parallels this subject area with dogmatic theology: Just as it contains an “essential ecclesiology”, so practical theology offers an “existential ecclesiology”.⁶
- According to Rahner, there is also a parallelism in relation to the field of church history. This discipline is not just a delimited area of secular historiography. Since it approaches its object with questions and aspects that arise from dogmatic theology, the discipline of church history is also a specifically theological science. Consequently, Rahner concludes: „If there can be a science that really works theologically, which has the past of the church as its field of study, then there must also be a really theological

5 The foreword by the editors (written by Rahner) to the first volume of the handbook already mentions as an all-encompassing basic question of the subject: “What must the church do today?” Arnold, 1964-1972, vol. 1, p. 5-6, here: p. 5; Lehmann, 1995-2018, vol. 19, p. 535.

6 However, Rahner always puts “existential ecclesiology” in quotation marks, in contrast to essential ecclesiology (cf. e. g. Lehmann, 1995-2018, vol. 19, p. 48). So he is well aware of the unfamiliarity of this expression.

- science that deals with the current situation of the church” (Rahner, 1960, p. 7; cf. Lehmann, 1995-2018, p. 9). And that science is pastoral theology.
- Since the subject of pastoral theology is the church, the discipline relies on the other theological disciplines. Dogmatic, moral theology and canon law – basically the systematic theology – are therefore “presupposed basic sciences” of pastoral theology. Pastoral theology repeats the research results of these disciplines only insofar, but then also without any hesitation, as this is necessary for its scope of study. Occasionally, however, Rahner continues, pastoral theology has to step in “supplementarily” instead of its “basic sciences” and deal with questions that should actually be assigned to systematic theology, but are not clarified there and only come into focus due to the problems of pastoral practice (ibidem, p. 10f; ibidem, p. 13). It is therefore to be concluded that pastoral theology also has a stimulating function for dogmatic, moral theology and canon law.
 - According to Rahner, the object of pastoral theology is fundamentally *all* ecclesiastical practices, the ecclesiastical self-fulfilment in its entirety: “If the salvific activity of the church is the object of the PTh [pastoral theology], then the whole self-fulfilment of the church must be the object of the PTh.” (ibidem, p. 5)⁷. Rahner explains what follows from this finding in a footnote to this passage. For him, the subject of pastoral care is therefore not only the clergy, but all believers: „It would be wrong clericalism if one just wants to call only the activity of the clergy pastoral care. Everyone bears a responsibility (albeit specifically differentiated) for everyone. Everyone is in his own way the ‘keeper of his brother’, in this sense also his ‘shepherd’, nonetheless not as his ‘master’ with actually sovereign authority” (ibidem, cf. ibidem, p. 8).
 - If, however, pastoral theology has, as shown above, the entire ecclesiastical realization as its object, then liturgical science, catechetics, homiletics, missiology and caritas science must be understood as “inner moments of the one pastoral theology”, i.e. as its daughter disciplines – which, according to Rahner, does not exclude that these practical-theological sub-sciences can be practised and taught separately for purely pragmatic-technical reasons (ibidem, p. 10f; ibidem, p. 12f).

7 Cf. Lehman, 1995-2018, vol. 19, p. 7: „Da das *ganze* Wesen der Kirche die geschichtlich greifbare (d. h. rechtliche und sakramentale und gesellschaftliche) eschatologische Präsenz des Heiles in Christo (als Forderung, Angebot und von Gottes Gnade schon verfügte Erfüllung) in der Welt und für die Welt ist, kann und muß der *ganze* aktuelle Selbstvollzug der Kirche (in sich, auf Gott, auf die Menschen als einzelne und als Gemeinschaft hin) als ‚Heilstätigkeit‘ (d. h. als Heilsschaffendes und Heilhaftes) der Kirche (sowohl als Anstalt wie auch als Heilsgemeinde) bezeichnet werden.“ Italics there.

- Besides the self-realization of the essence of the church – the material object of pastoral theology – the second essential point in Rahner’s determination of the discipline is the present situation. The respective “present” must be analyzed to find out how church practice currently is and how it is having an impact, and what the church needs to do in the present. Therefore, the analysis of the present situation is also an object of pastoral theology, but in this case as the “Formalobjekt” (formal object). This formal object indicates the aspect under which the material object – the self-fulfilment of the church – has to be considered; because if it were about the church’s self-fulfilment in the past, this would not be the subject of pastoral theology, but of church history.
- This analysis of the present situation is the “core piece” of the discipline, as Rahner writes; it is “something like the ‘fundamental theology’ of the PTh [pastoral theology] and its ratio specifica” - its distinctive peculiarity (ibidem, p. 6; cf. ibidem, p. 8). No other discipline can provide this analysis of the present or has it as its subject: neither the systematic-theological disciplines (dogmatic, moral theology, canon law) nor the practical-theological daughter disciplines (catechetics, religious education, liturgy, homiletics, caritas science, missiology). The analysis of the present is the distinguishing criterion in relation to all these disciplines, which according to Rahner, is of central importance. Therefore, pastoral theology is also more than the sum of its sub-disciplines and daughter disciplines because it thematizes what is not dealt with in this way in the daughter disciplines: the self-fulfilment of the church in the face of the current situation, as it results from the analysis of the present (ibidem, p. 11f; ibidem, p. 13f).
- Pastoral theology must derive from this analysis of the present - and in it going beyond its own daughter disciplines as well as the other theological disciplines - an overall plan for the church’s self-fulfilment in view of the present situation. To make things clearer, Rahner contrasts the terms “tactics” and “strategy”, which come from the military field. He writes: „One could perhaps say in this regard: in the previous PTh [pastoral theology] (even if one still takes into account some of the topics from canonical and moral theology) it was actually only about the tactics of the action of the church and even this only with regard to the action of the subordinate organs of the church (the priest, the pastor), but not about the strategy of the church in relation to the overall historical situation. Questions about the great strategy of the church have hitherto been at most marginally the subject of a theological discipline” (ibidem, p. 11; cf. ibidem, p. 14).

This point is very important to Rahner. The discipline pastoral theology must not be content with ostensibly easy-to-handle “recipes” for pastoral care, as he once wrote, that is, to be pleased with a mere “recipetology” for pastoral care, especially only for pastors or clergy. Instead, the discipline must take into account the fundamental premises and perspectives of pastoral action – from the top church leadership in Rome to the actions of individual Christians on site. An overall pastoral planning is necessary, which is not only geared towards short-term purposes but also pursues longer-term goals in a coherent manner. It also requires a comprehensive theological clarification of what the church actually is and what she wants, as well as a detailed analysis of the respective present situation in which the – planned, coherent and long-term and therefore “strategically” oriented – actualisation of the essence of the Church should happen.

- It is therefore ultimately consistent that Rahner not only sees the realization of the church in the present as an object of pastoral theology; but rather, he deems overall planning necessary also for the self-fulfilment of the church in the future. That is why Rahner even early provided for a corresponding final chapter on when he was planning the “Handbuch der Pastoraltheologie” (ibidem, p. 33; ibidem, p. 40). Although he withdrew more and more as an author as the work progressed, he wrote this final programmatic part in the fourth volume of the handbook himself. This shows how important he considered this chapter, which he entitled with the words: “The future of the church has already begun” (Arnold, 1964-1972, vol. 4, p. 744-759). Here, Rahner presents – probably as the first one – something like a pastoral futurology, which was later attempted also by other theologians.
- Methodically, the analysis of the present according to Rahner should be carried out with the help of the secular sciences. “Ancillary sciences” of pastoral theology are accordingly sociology, pedagogy, rhetoric, history, psychology, etc. - “in short all secular anthropological sciences”. Nevertheless, as Rahner further emphasizes, this analysis of the present is decidedly a theological one, because it illuminates the respective present essentially through theological principles (Rahner, 1960, p. 6, 11; Lehmann, 1995-2018, vol. 19, p. 8, 13). But how the relationship between empiricism and theology should be concretely conceived, Rahner leaves it very unclear here.
- Finally, for the structure of the handbook – which is also an essential innovation – Rahner dissented an orientation towards the traditional scheme of the threefold office of teacher, priest and shepherd, because this was “a historically and factually problematic tripartite division” that originally

stems from Protestant theology. It does not make it sufficiently clear who is meant to be the bearer of this threefold office (again only the priest?); the unity and the theological determination of these three offices are not sufficiently demonstrated (*ibidem*, p. 17; *ibidem*, p. 18). Instead, already in the first outline of the planned work, Rahner refers to the essential functions of church (*ibidem*, p. 26; *ibidem*, p. 34). In the manual itself, he then initially uses a six-part version,⁸ which he soon traces back to the three basic functions of liturgy, proclamation of faith and diakonia (Arnold, 1964-1972, vol. 1, p. 219; Lehmann, 1995-2018, vol. 19, p. 151)⁹.

Rahner's approach became the conceptual basis of the "Handbuch der Pastoraltheologie", which appeared in five volumes resp. six sub-volumes from 1964 to 1972. But how was the scientific reception of this ambitious work?

2. RECEPTION AND CRITICISM OF RAHNER'S APPROACH

With the "Handbuch der Pastoraltheologie" and the approach on which it is based, Karl Rahner has undoubtedly made a significant contribution to the theoretical foundation of this theological discipline. Nevertheless, this impressive compendium was unexpectedly quickly forgotten.¹⁰ Newer pastoral theological concepts soon attracted greater attention, in particular the view of practical theology as an action science developed by Rolf Zerfaß following the American pastoral theologian Seward Hiltner (Zerfaß, 1974; Zerfaß, 1973). It was in particular the determination of the relationship between empirical methodology and theological theory, which turned out to be a weak point of Rahner's conception. The analysis of the present should be carried out with the help of the empirical sciences, particularly sociology; at the same time, however, it is a decidedly theological analysis. This raises the question of the relationship between empiricism and theology, specifically, whether the former is not inadmissibly subordinated to the latter, so that theological theory basically dominates and suppresses the empirical findings. This deficit in the methodological justification aroused much criticism. In fact, Rahner's descriptions of the present situation in the handbook do not go beyond socio-philosophical analyses; the empirical procedure and the relationship between theory and practice remain

8 „Proclamation of the word, cult, the dispensing of the sacraments, ecclesiastical legal life, christian life in all its breadth and caritas“. Arnold, 1964-1972, vol. 1, p. 216; Lehmann, 1995-2018, vol. 19, p. 148.

9 Rahner mentions here: "The proclamation of the word – eucharist – life of love".

10 For reception and criticism see: August Laumer, 2010, p. 385-449.

unclear. But it was precisely in this that Zerfaß tried to continue the practical theological conception.

The criticism also touched on the theoretical breadth of the extensive "Handbuch der Pastoraltheologie". Rahner's background in systematic theology might have certainly played a role here. Another allegation related to the ecclesio-centricity of his approach. Above all, the term „Selbstvollzug der Kirche“ (self-realization of the church) suggests at first glance a self-reflection within the church, a "circling around itself" of the church. On a closer inquiry however, it becomes clear that this criticism is ultimately not applicable. This is because the abbreviated formula „self-fulfilment of church“ – certainly also used by Rahner himself – actually means, as he explains several times, the "self-realization of the *essence* of the church". The essence of the church, however, also with Rahner consists precisely in the service to and for this world, so it has an ecclesio-*eccentric* orientation. The mission of the church into the world and the missionary dimension of being a Christian are also seen very well in the manual. Rahner tried to counter this ecclesiocentric misunderstanding by making changes in the second edition of the first volume.¹¹

That notwithstanding, the question arises whether the formula "self-realization of the church" already says all that is required. Rolf Zerfaß, for example, asked whether an "existential ecclesiology" actually already circumscribes the whole of practical theology (Zerfaß, 1974; Zerfaß, 1973, p. 92), i.e. whether this discipline does not go beyond the interests of the church. Of course, behind "church" stands the claim of the Christian message; because, according to Rahner, she is the eschatological, i.e. unsurpassable „Bleibendheit“ (abidingness), the historical and social presence of God's self-communication in Jesus Christ (cf. Lehmann, 1995-2018, vol. 19, p. 51f, 69). But if there is a more fundamental point of reference than the church, namely the self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ – in his life and deeds, in his message of the kingdom of God, i.e. in his gospel – then one can ask whether it makes sense to make the church so much the central norm of pastoral care and pastoral theology. In other words: Even more important than the reference to ecclesiology are undoubtedly the doctrine of God, Christology and soteriology. An ecclesiological approach, as it has already come across several times in the history of pastoral

11 „Das Wort ‚Selbstvollzug‘ muß in seinem *formalen* Sinn gelesen werden. Es impliziert keine ‚Introvertiertheit‘ der Kirche, als ob ihr Tun sich letztlich auf sie selbst bezöge. Sie hat Gott anzubeten, dem Heil der Menschen zu dienen, für die Welt da zu sein. *Dieses* alles ist gerade ihr Selbstvollzug, genauso wie ein Mensch sich gerade dadurch selbst vollzieht, daß er durch Gott liebt und dadurch von sich weggommt.“ Lehmann 1995-2018, vol. 19, p. 47. Italics there.

theology (cf. Graf, 1841; ; Noppel, 1949¹²), must therefore be supplemented and expanded into a theological-christological-soteriological conception. Otherwise there is the risk, that building up the church gets so much into the forefront that the individual relationship of man with God is no longer seen. In fact, the individual human being in the “Handbuch der Pastoraltheologie” only comes into view in his or her relationship to the church, not in his or her being a subject before God. This is all the more astonishing as Rahner himself represented a clearly different perspective in his basic theological approach, which in turn has given essential impulses for contemporary pastoral theology.

3. KARL RAHNER'S IMPULSES FOR A MYSTAGOGICAL PASTORAL CARE

The experience of God is of central importance in Karl Rahner's theological works (cf. Vorgrimler, Rahner, 2004). What is essential is the understanding of revelation: According to Rahner, God does not reveal anything or a series of truths, but rather himself, as Rahner makes clear with the use of the term “self-communication”. Revelation “is God's personal self-communication, the personal encounter between God and man” (Greshake, 2019, p. 65)¹³. This corresponds to Rahner's conviction that the human being can experience God in his resp. her life. However, this requires a mystagogy that unlocks these experiences of God for people. Rahner therefore repeatedly called for a “new mystagogy”¹⁴, and this postulation can probably even be viewed as the practical sum of his theoretical considerations on the experience of God and his grace (cf. Laumer, 2010, p. 434). Regarding pastoral care, he admonished finally in 1978: “But the fact remains: man can experience God for himself. And your pastoral care should have this goal inexorably in mind at every step. (Lehmann, 1995-2018, vol. 25, p. 302)”¹⁵.

12 Especially with Graf, who conceives practical theology as the “science of the church building herself into the future”, but also with Noppel an ecclesiocentrism can be ascertained, which Rahner initially avoids by understanding the discipline as the science of the self-realization of the essence of the church. But Rahner's approach is more sublime ecclesiocentric because it nonetheless focuses practical theology too much on the central principle of the church.

13 Rahner himself writes 1984: „Die eigentliche und einzige Mitte des Christentums und seiner Botschaft ist darum für mich die wirkliche Selbstmitteilung Gottes in seiner eigensten Wirklichkeit und Herrlichkeit an die Kreatur, ist das Bekenntnis zu der unwahrscheinlichsten Wahrheit, daß Gott selbst mit seiner unendlichen Wirklichkeit und Herrlichkeit, Heiligkeit, Freiheit und Liebe wirklich ohne Abstrich bei uns selbst in der Kreatürlichkeit unserer Existenz ankommen kann und alles andere, was das Christentum anbietet oder von uns fordert, demgegenüber nur Vorläufigkeit oder sekundäre Konsequenz ist.“ Rahner, 1984, p 110; cited in: Batlogg et al. (ed.), 2004, p. 301.

14 See the references at Laumer, 2010, p. 432-444.

15 Although the speech is initially addressed to the members of the order, Rahner's demand as a stringent conclusion from the central importance of the experience of God is of fundamental pastoral relevance.

Ultimately, however, Rahner's remarks on this "new mystagogy" remain fragmentary, as he himself admits¹⁶. But his suggestions have been taken up in practical theology since the 1970s, and with reference to further basic premises of his theology, they have been expanded into systematic concepts of mystagogical pastoral care and mystagogical learning¹⁷. In particular, Rahner's conviction that the "natura pura" is only a theoretical construct and that human beings have always been „begnadet“ (they have been given Grace) since the beginning of their existence, that is, related to God and his love ("übernatürliches Existential" – supernatural existential) and surrounded by it (cf. Vorgrimler, 2004, p. 176), has gained importance here. To unlock this work of God in the respective life story, to discover the traces of God in one's own life, is therefore the central concern of a mystagogical pastoral or a mystagogical religious education.

Karl Rahner contributed significantly to the scientific-theoretical foundation of pastoral theology with his understanding of the discipline as a science of the self-realization of the church in the respective current situation and with the "Handbuch der Pastoraltheologie", which he edited in a responsible position. No less fruitful for pastoral theology, however, were his impulses for mystagogy, as was his theological approach in general that the human being can experience God. But it is precisely these impulses from Rahner that make it clear that practical theology cannot limit itself to an "existential ecclesiology", but must take man's relationship to God as the starting point and goal of its reflections and its options for pastoral action.

16 Karl Rahner in a letter to Klaus P. Fischer on September 1, 1973, reprinted in: Fischer, 1974, p. 400-410, here: p. 407; included in: Lehmann, 1995-2018, vol. 22, p. 823-832, here: p. 830.

17 See for instance in the German-speaking area: Zulehner, 2002; included in: Lehmann, 1995-2018, vol. 28, p. 245-333; Knobloch, Haslinger (ed.), 1991; Schambeck, 2006. An overview of other authors and literature is provided by Nauer, 2001, p. 91-99; Laumer, 2010, p. 445f.

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SUMMARY

It is surprising that Karl Rahner (1904-1984), as a systematic theologian, provided essential impulses for practical theology. But he played an important role in planning and editing the “Handbuch der Pastoraltheologie” (1964-1972). The basis for this work was Rahners view of practical theology as a science of the self-fulfillment of the church in the respective current situation. However, this ecclesial conception of pastoral theology soon encountered opposition. On the other hand, his demand for a “new mystagogy” was often taken up for concepts of mystagogical pastoral care and mystagogical learning.

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