

Karl

RAHNER

GREAT THINKERS

CAMDEN M. BUCEY

More Praise for *Karl Rahner*

“Roman Catholic apologists often boast about their church’s antiquity but seldom mention modern Roman Catholic theology, which often sounds as modern as liberal Protestantism. Karl Rahner, one of the most influential Roman Catholic theologians of the twentieth century, whose prominence was evident at the Second Vatican Council, is one of the best examples of Roman Catholicism’s modernity. Camden Bucey’s fair-minded and careful assessment of Rahner’s theology is valuable in itself, but doubly so for anyone wanting an introduction to modern Roman Catholicism’s own contribution to liberal Christian theology.”

—**D. G. Hart**, Distinguished Associate Professor of History,
Hillsdale College

“For those interested in getting to the heart of Karl Rahner’s theology of Trinitarian personality, Camden Bucey’s treatment is exceptional. Bucey lauds Rahner’s insistence that humanity receive the grace of God through communion with him, but the author exposes how Rahner’s methodology—particularly his identifying of Christ’s hypostatic union as conduit of ontological self-communication—falls short. Following in the path of Reformed biblical theologians Geerhardus Vos and Meredith Kline, Bucey shows how God gives himself to his people in a mystical and covenantal bond that has been brought about through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ in history.”

—**Danny Olinger**, General Secretary for the Committee
on Christian Education, Orthodox Presbyterian Church;
author, *Geerhardus Vos: Reformed Biblical Theologian,*
Confessional Presbyterian

“Continuing in the confessional Presbyterian tradition of Geerhardus Vos, Cornelius Van Til, and Robert Strimple, Dr. Bucey not only clearly expounds and trenchantly critiques

Rahner's theological proposal, but also points the way forward to a consistently biblical and covenantal Trinitarian alternative."

—**Lane G. Tipton**, Charles Krahe Chair of Systematic Theology and Associate Professor of Systematic Theology, Westminster Theological Seminary

"Karl Rahner was singularly important to modern theology—both as a key catalyst in the revival of interest in Trinitarian theology and as an important influence on Vatican II and the shaping of modern Catholicism—and yet his work is conceptually daunting for those unfamiliar with the concerns of the transcendental Thomism, which he helped to formulate, and has therefore remained something of a closed book to many Protestants. This volume by Camden Bucey offers both an accessible introduction to Rahner's thought and a critique from an avowedly Van Tillian perspective. Readers may not agree with all of Bucey's arguments and conclusions, but he nonetheless provides a dialogue point for engaging an important strand of modern Catholic thought and Van Tillian critiques of Catholic theology."

—**Carl R. Trueman**, Professor of Biblical & Religious Studies, Grove City College

"Though Karl Rahner is among the most significant Roman Catholic theologians of the twentieth century, he is little known (and seldom read) by evangelical and Reformed theologians. Camden Bucey's fine study offers an excellent summary of Rahner's Trinitarian theology that promises to redress this problem. He not only provides a helpful explanation of Rahner's well-known Trinitarian axiom ('the "economic" Trinity is the "immanent" Trinity'), but also locates it within the broader context of Rahner's anthropocentric theology. While Bucey critically engages Rahner's theology from a Reformed perspective, he does so throughout in a careful, irenic, and constructive fashion."

—**Cornelis P. Venema**, President and Professor of Doctrinal Studies, Mid-America Reformed Seminary

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Karl
RAHNER

Camden M. Bucey


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For Erica

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SERIES INTRODUCTION

Amid the rise and fall of nations and civilizations, the influence of a few great minds has been profound. Some of these remain relatively obscure, even as their thought shapes our world; others have become household names. As we engage our cultural and social contexts as ambassadors and witnesses for Christ, we must identify and test against the Word those thinkers who have so singularly formed the present age.

The Great Thinkers series is designed to meet the need for critically assessing the seminal thoughts of these thinkers. Great Thinkers hosts a colorful roster of authors analyzing primary source material against a background of historical contextual issues, and providing rich theological assessment and response from a Reformed perspective.

Each author was invited to meet a threefold goal, so that each Great Thinkers volume is, first, *academically informed*. The brevity of Great Thinkers volumes sets a premium on each author's command of the subject matter and on the secondary discussions that have shaped each thinker's influence. Our authors identify the most influential features of their thinkers'

work and address them with precision and insight. Second, the series maintains a high standard of *biblical and theological faithfulness*. Each volume stands on an epistemic commitment to “the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27), and is thereby equipped for fruitful critical engagement. Finally, Great Thinkers texts are *accessible*, not burdened with jargon or unnecessarily difficult vocabulary. The goal is to inform and equip the reader as effectively as possible through clear writing, relevant analysis, and incisive, constructive critique. My hope is that this series will distinguish itself by striking with biblical faithfulness and the riches of the Reformed tradition at the central nerves of culture, cultural history, and intellectual heritage.

Bryce Craig, president of P&R Publishing, deserves hearty thanks for his initiative and encouragement in setting the series in motion and seeing it through. Many thanks as well to P&R’s director of academic development, John Hughes, who has assumed, with cool efficiency, nearly every role on the production side of each volume. The Rev. Mark Moser carried much of the burden in the initial design of the series, acquisitions, and editing of the first several volumes. And the expert participation of Amanda Martin, P&R’s editorial director, was essential at every turn. I have long admired P&R Publishing’s commitment, steadfast now for over eighty-five years, to publishing excellent books promoting biblical understanding and cultural awareness, especially in the area of Christian apologetics. Sincere thanks to P&R, to these fine brothers and sisters, and to several others not mentioned here for the opportunity to serve as editor of the Great Thinkers series.

Nathan D. Shannon
Seoul, Korea

FOREWORD

You know it when you see it—a responsible theologian.

It's not the letters following one's name. It's not the dusty old books piled on one's desk. Nor is it the flattering endorsement by someone who describes one as "astute," "attentive," or "prescient."

A responsible theologian exhibits faith that seeks understanding, guided by the illumination of the Spirit—a faith that demonstrates the interrelationship of all truth. Without allowing doctrine to sit in abstract isolation from the whole, the good theologian is called to set his ideas within the full body of Christian thought, examining their veracity against the ultimate source of authority, the inspired text of Scripture. Furthermore, theology must never be an entrepreneurial endeavor; rather, it is undertaken on the shoulders of the two-millennia-strong Christian community. Finally, the theologian always understands his calling as worship.

But even for such a theologian, there is danger. It's possible to cover all these bases and still miss the mark by doing theology in the wrong place—that is, by doing theology in a proverbial "echo

chamber.” Echo chambers are hollow enclosures whose structure allows sound to reverberate. The idea is to enclose sound so that it continues to resound without depletion or intrusion.

Does this sound familiar? All that can be heard is a single voice, one so dominant that all other sounds are mere distractions to be ignored. This is precisely where theologians face danger. When our faith seeks understanding in the same predictable and finite place (the same authors, journals, and conversation partners) without ever listening to outside voices, we unwittingly find ourselves in a doctrinal echo chamber—the kind of “bubble trouble” that impoverishes theological reflection.

This leads to a question that may lie between you and this volume. Why would you invest time in a book that explores the theology of Karl Rahner? Perhaps you are intrigued by Rahner’s theory of “anonymous Christianity.” Or maybe you have heard someone describe him as the most influential Catholic theologian of the twentieth century. Even so, between now and the grave you have only a finite amount of reading time, so why give your attention to this topic? Camden Bucey provides a clear answer:

Rahner remains widely influential in Catholic theology and a perennial dialogue partner in mainline Protestant thought. But he has gone virtually unnoticed in the confessionally Reformed church. Reformed theologians will have fundamental differences with Rahner regarding nearly all theological *loci*. Nevertheless, Rahner asked many important theological questions that deserve confessionally Reformed attention. Too easily, critics dismiss those who are most different from themselves without doing the homework of truly understanding them. We would be better served by studying Rahner on his own terms. Only then can we understand his theological formulations and see their value for ecumenical dialogue—not for the purpose

of superficial rapprochement, but for sharpening our understanding of God's desire to bring his people into consummated union and communion with him.

Camden Bucey is a responsible theologian. He is not only devoted to the principles of the Reformation, but also committed to helping readers escape from familiar echo chambers. He offers the gift of popping our provincial bubbles in favor of a far deeper and broader version of Reformed catholicity. Of the various ways in which he accomplishes this, there are a couple for which we should be particularly grateful.

Bucey's treatment of Rahner helps us to appreciate the holistic integration of theological thought—how doctrinal elements coalesce into an organic and unified system. As he states, "I want the reader to understand Rahner's theology as an organism." For Rahner, the key idea is the self-communication of God to humanity, a Trinitarian economy that unfolds through redemptive history, culminating in the victory of Christ, and experienced by men and women who are conformed to the divine image. Such integration provides needed inspiration and insight, particularly at a time when theological systems tend to fall short of a Trinitarian vision or fail to maintain a consistently Godward focus. These lessons are valuable, even when one doesn't agree with all of Rahner's conclusions.

Another vital contribution of Rahner concerns the personal nature of salvation, the uncreated grace of the triune God that renews a soul. As Bucey describes Rahner's view, "God communicates nothing less than himself to human beings, who are created specifically to receive this gift of self; therefore, the very fabric of man's nature discloses the characteristics of the God who desires to give himself to them." Here again, the timely importance of Rahner's point can hardly be overstated. In a day of sterile individualism, when autonomous freedom and the

protection of personal interests keep us sequestered from one another, the message of the personal God who reconciles us in Trinitarian love is precisely what our lonely hearts need.

In short, Bucey's work makes me think of the opera by Michael Nyman, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*, based on a book by the same title, which featured research from neurologist Oliver Sacks. It tells the story of a patient who suffered from severe amnesia, a condition called *visual agnosia*. The disorientation not only impoverished his memory, but also affected his outlook on every dimension of life, including his most intimate relationship. It's a message that also pertains to theologians.

Because our theology relates to all of life and informs our most intimate relationships, we need to find liberation from our misleading myopias in service of a clearer vision of the triune God, a Reformed catholicity that is rooted in redemptive grace and has Christ at the center. This is the gift that Camden Bucey offers readers in these pages.

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“de-dissertationing” this work. The author is solely to blame for any shortcomings.

Lastly, I want to thank my family. My sons, Derek, Miles, and David, sacrificed time with their father as I researched and wrote. My parents, Mark and Pamela Bucey, have also been faithful encouragers to me. I thank them for teaching me in word and deed what it means to have a personal relationship with the triune God. Most of all, I want to thank my loving and excellent wife, Erica, who has been unwavering in her support. I dedicate this work to her.

1

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

While John Paul II or Benedict XVI could challenge for the role, a compelling case can be made that Karl Rahner, SJ (1904–84), was the most influential Catholic theologian of the twentieth century. Rahner’s theological influence is perhaps most evident in the theology of the Second Vatican Council. Vatican II was itself the most significant event in Catholicism in the twentieth century, and Rahner’s fingerprints are all over its documents. He did not write them, but his influence was pervasive. Some have even called him “the Holy Ghost writer of Vatican II.” Rahner’s theology is representative of a significant portion of post-Vatican II Catholicism, which itself is representative of a modern inclusivistic approach to world religions, missions, and social engagement. Studying Rahner is a convenient shortcut for grasping a wide-reaching program of theology. It is odd that while Rahner is so significant and well-known in Catholic circles (whether loved or hated), he has gone relatively unnoticed in the Reformed tradition. We have had our hands full with theologians like Karl

Barth. Whereas hundreds, if not thousands, of volumes have been written on Barth, surprisingly few have been written on Rahner by Reformed theologians. My goal is to increase awareness of and promote deeper engagement with Rahner's theology in this brief introduction.

Rahner probes the deepest questions of Scripture: Who is God? Why did God create man? What is the future of humanity? In seeking to answer these questions, Rahner introduced or developed several theological principles that have received widespread adoption in Catholicism as well as Protestantism. He is well known for his Trinitarian axiom that "the 'economic' Trinity is the 'immanent' Trinity and the 'immanent' Trinity is the 'economic' Trinity."¹ While Rahner readily admits that he was not the first to present this idea, he nevertheless became the face of it and used the idea to develop a bold theology. Rahner is also known for his theology of the "anonymous Christian," the doctrine that people may be saved by Jesus Christ without ever hearing the gospel or professing faith in Christ—without even knowing or having heard of Jesus and his claims. Far from being discreet developments, these major theological contributions are deeply related.

Rahner was born in Freiburg im Breisgau, Germany, and raised in a Catholic home. In 1922, he entered the Society of Jesus. As part of his Jesuit training, Rahner studied philosophy at Feldkirch, Austria, and Pullach, Germany, and then theology in Valkenburg, Holland. After he was ordained in 1932, Rahner's Jesuit superiors directed him toward doctoral studies in philosophy. But after an unfortunate disagreement with his advisor over his approach to the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas, Rahner moved to studying theology. In 1936, he received his doctorate in theology from the University of Innsbruck in

1. Karl Rahner, *The Trinity* (New York: Crossroad, 1997), 22.

Austria and embarked upon a storied academic and ecclesiastical life. He saw himself censored by the magisterium, only to become a theological expert (*peritus*) and one of the most influential figures at the Second Vatican Council. He held several teaching posts, lectured widely, and wrote until his death, just twenty-five days after his eightieth birthday.² Several decades after his death, Rahner's legacy is still taking shape, and while the luster of Rahnerian studies may have dulled after the turn of the century, his influence is still felt.

Many excellent introductions to Rahner's theology exist, and I do not intend to replicate them.³ I seek to do something different, something that will lead to a deeper understanding of Rahner's theology *as a whole*. We could simply list a dozen or so talking points on Rahner's theology, but then the reader would only obtain a glossary-level understanding of his theology, merely matching terms to discreet definitions. I want the reader to understand these doctrines individually, but, more importantly, I want the reader to understand Rahner's theology as an organism. As we begin with Rahner's Trinitarian theology and move through each of the traditional departments of theology, we will learn how Rahner develops one basic idea from beginning to end. Rahner's entire theological program is concerned to explain how God communicates himself to humanity, whom he created specifically for this purpose of self-communication. If we understand one thing about Rahner, it must be this point. Everything

2. Harvey Egan has compiled a chronology to accompany his brief biography of Rahner. Much of this information has been taken from Harvey Egan, *Karl Rahner: Mystic of Everyday Life* (New York: Crossroad, 1998), 14–27. For an extensive biography of both Karl and Hugo Rahner, see Karl H. Neufeld, *Die Brüder Rahner: Eine Biographie* (Freiburg: Herder, 1994).

3. For example, William V. Dych, *Karl Rahner* (Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, 1992); Egan, *Karl Rahner*; Karen Kilby, *Karl Rahner: A Brief Introduction* (New York: Crossroad, 2007); Herbert Vorgrimler, *Understanding Karl Rahner: An Introduction to His Life and Thought* (New York: Crossroad, 1986).

Rahner does theologically is about this basic idea. By tracing that thread, we will gain an understanding of his Trinitarian axiom and his doctrine of the “anonymous Christian” much deeper than we could have through the standard handbook format.

Outline and Summary of the Argument

If Rahner’s fundamental concern is to explain how God communicates himself to humanity, it is prudent to begin our exploration with the doctrine of God in order to describe precisely who God is. Rahner wants to maintain Nicene orthodoxy in his doctrine of the Trinity, but he is wary of some of its language, especially the language of “person.” For Rahner, the personal subjectivity that applies to finite creatures is based upon limitation and the experience of “otherness.” God does not experience himself in this way. He is not a subject before another subject, and therefore the divine essence cannot exist as a “person” in this sense. But that does not rule out the language of “person” in all senses. In terms of one notion of personhood, involving self-consciousness and free agency, God is the absolute “person,” who gives the gift of himself to humanity. This is the essence of religion at the heart of the deepest question of both divine and human existence.

Rahner identifies the Father with the divine essence, while the Son and Spirit are not immediately identified with the essence, but rather with the Father.⁴ This ordering is true for Rahner according to both divine ontology and economy, that is, in terms of God’s being in himself and his actions with regard to creation. Ontology and economy are closely linked for Rahner, because the divine self-communication that humanity experiences in

4. Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* (New York: Seabury, 1978), 118.

history has its foundation in an eternal self-communication of the Father. As I will explain in the next chapter, the Father is properly the “absolute person” of the Godhead, while the Son and Spirit are communicated expressions of that absolute person. The economic Trinity should be understood as a new, concrete expression of the immanent Trinity. That is to say, the experience of the Trinity in history is an expression of an eternal reality—the Father’s eternal self-communication of Son and Spirit. I will seek to demonstrate that, for Rahner, the unity of the Godhead is more basic than the diversity. This ontological “imbalance” ultimately compromises Rahner’s theology of divine self-communication.

Man, as spirit in the world, is the capable recipient of God’s gift of self. He is like a divinely created radio that is capable of receiving God’s frequency. For Rahner, man possesses a twofold nature (spiritual and historical), which corresponds to God’s twofold self-communication (Son and Holy Spirit). This relationship between the divine giver and his intended recipient is thoroughly personal. It is characterized by thought, emotion, and freedom. God freely chooses whether to communicate himself, and human beings freely choose whether to accept that communication. Seeing that the acceptance of such a gift would have significant effects upon humanity, Rahner must ensure that the gift is both given and received. He does so through his doctrine of Christ. When the eternal Son of God assumed a human nature, he became the new humanity, actualizing and intensifying the relationship between God and man. In his person, he guarantees the divine free offer of grace and its human acceptance. This solidifies God’s saving purpose.⁵ God does in the person of Christ what he intends to do for all who open themselves

5. Karl Rahner, “Christology within an Evolutionary View of the World,” in *Theological Investigations*, trans. Karl-H. Kruger, vol. 5 (Baltimore: Helicon, 1966), 183–84.

in freedom. When a person accepts this divine gift of self, he or she receives an ontological self-communication that results in a change of being.

Although the main features of Rahner's theology complement one another, internal inconsistencies render his program implausible. Consequently, Rahner cannot deliver what he initially promises. God is seeking to give the gift of himself, and that self is triune. But in Rahner's theology, the content of the gift is the Father, identified with the divine essence, whereas the Son and Spirit are not directly identified with the essence. The Father communicates himself as Son and Spirit, but since the Godhead knows no genuinely personal "other" within the Trinity, Rahner is unable to identify another equally ultimate "person" to receive that intra-Trinitarian self-communication. And therefore, since the Son and Spirit are fundamentally self-communications of the Father, Rahner directs his Trinitarian theology externally by connecting his conceptions of *hypostasis* and divine self-communication to humanity through his Christology.

In practice, Rahner employs an anthropocentric theological method that begins with human experience, because Rahner must go to humanity in order to complete his doctrine of the Trinity. Still, his error is deeper than a misdirected methodology. Rahner cannot "solve" his problems by adopting a new starting point. These are deep-seated and systemic issues that, in spite of their common cause and relation, force his overall theological program into internal inconsistency. Rahner's insistence that God desires to give the gift of himself is biblical, but his theological formulations prevent him from explaining exactly how God gives the gift of himself if he is essentially Trinitarian. Rahner's theology is Trinitarian in delivery only, because unity and diversity are not ontologically absolute. Trinitarian diversity (the persons of the Godhead) serves as the means by which the unity of God (identified particularly with the Father) is communicated.

In his theology, Rahner seeks answers to the most important questions of human existence. I am thankful that he compels us to consider more deeply the wonderful mystery of God's relationship to his people. Yet, as I hope to demonstrate, the doctrines he formulates prove to be inadequate. Leaning upon the theology of Cornelius Van Til, I will seek to offer biblically sustainable answers to these questions. In response to Rahner's ontological model of self-communication, which leads to a change of being in its recipients, we will consider a covenantal framework for understanding the beatific vision. We will come to learn how, through covenant, God is conforming his people to his image, replicating his glory analogously in his people through the resurrected Christ (cf. Gen. 1:26–27; Rom. 8:29; 2 Cor. 3:18). Only by sharing in his image can God's people truly experience consummated union and communion with the *triune* God.