

**KARL RAHNER'S SUPERNATURAL EXISTENTIAL  
A Wesleyan Parallel?**

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It is frequently suggested that John Wesley's theology has important similarities of emphasis with Roman Catholic theology. One particular area that is mentioned in this regard by Colin Williams is Wesley's doctrine of prevenient grace.<sup>1</sup> It is Williams' contention that an investigation of the similarities between this Wesleyan doctrine and the Catholic understanding of grace and salvation would be of significant help for furthering ecumenical dialogue.

This paper seeks to evaluate Williams' claim by investigating the doctrine of nature and grace formulated by the Catholic theologian Karl Rahner under the designation "supernatural existential." Following an exposition of Rahner, attention will be directed to the many points of similarity between his position and Wesley's doctrine of prevenient grace. Finally, there will be an attempt to assess the remaining difference between these two positions and its implication.

Rahner's presentation was chosen as the partner in dialogue for this study because it is one of the most influential and clearly articulated contemporary Catholic understandings of grace.<sup>2</sup>

**Rahner's Supernatural Existential**

Rahner never gives a separate extended treatment of what he has termed the "supernatural existential." Rather, he touches on it briefly in various contexts as it is relevant. Therefore, the first task of this study will be to present a brief summary of this doctrine drawing on the pertinent primary sources,<sup>3</sup> with the help of a significant secondary treatment by Kenneth Eberhard.<sup>4</sup>

Besides sources, the other problem in discussing Rahner's doctrine of the supernatural existential is that there is no necessary starting point for getting into the doctrine and many possible ones. The procedure adopted here is to discuss briefly his understanding of revelation in general and then narrow in on the relation of humanity to revelation. Treatment of this subsidiary material will add clarity to the later direct discussion of the supernatural existential.

For Rahner, as a Christian theologian, the existence of revelation is assumed as a given. What is required of the theologian is not to prove that this revelation exists, but rather to enquire into its nature and, even more importantly, the nature of humanity as a being capable of receiving revelation. Rahner's most significant observations about revelation are found in these anthropological reflections.

In the tradition of transcendental Thomism, Rahner defines humanity as that being which is always present to itself (self-conscious) and, at the same time, experiences itself as open to a mysterious Infinity which transcends its self-awareness and calls all normal human experiences into question.<sup>5</sup> Put briefly, humans are those beings who question their being. We do not experience our existence as closed in upon itself, but as open to others and the future. Indeed, we experience ourselves as dependent upon this openness for our very existence.<sup>6</sup> This experience of openness to Infinity or mystery is not a special experience reserved only for "inspirational" moments, rather it is the "horizon" of all human experience. At the same time, this experience is not such that it can be directly apprehended and conceptualized, rather it is the transcendental horizon that accompanies all conceptual experience as its ground of possibility.<sup>7</sup>

The significance of this anthropological analysis is that Rahner identifies this transcendental experience of openness to mystery as God—insofar as we humans can experience God.<sup>8</sup> That is, this experience of openness to mystery is the basis of revelation.

To further develop Rahner's understanding of revelation, it is necessary to consider two sets of distinctions. First, Rahner distinguishes between the human experience of the transcendental presence of God as the infinite mystery which encounters us as Question and the presence of God in intimate proximity as Answer.<sup>9</sup> This distinction is seen as analogous to the traditional distinction between natural and supernatural revelation. However, Rahner is hesitant to use the term "natural revelation" because, as shall be seen, he wants to argue that even the presence of God to humanity as Question is a manifestation of grace, not the product of an innate human capacity. The fact that it is universal does not make it any less gracious.<sup>10</sup>

Secondly, within supernatural revelation itself (God present as Answer), Rahner distinguishes between two aspects—transcendental and historical.<sup>11</sup> Transcendental supernatural revelation is the experience of God as intimate forgiving Presence which each of us may have in our transcendental, nonobjectifiable consciousness. Historical supernatural revelation is the mediation of this *same mystery* in objective historical form—the biblical history of revelation. While distinct, there is a circu-

lar relationship between transcendental and historical supernatural revelation.<sup>12</sup> The ultimate historical revelation is that one which expresses in objectified form the *same mystery* every person experiences in their transcendental consciousness. It is on this basis that Christianity can understand itself as the process by which the history of revelation reaches a definite and successful level of historical reflection.<sup>13</sup> Its uniqueness lies in the fact that it gives the exemplary historical manifestation of this universal transcendental revelation.

One of the results of this second distinction is Rahner's claim that "even outside the process of official revelation the history of religion is not merely a product of natural reason and sin . . . (rather) it is the product of natural spirit, grace, and sin."<sup>14</sup> This is so because supernatural revelation in its transcendental form is not restricted to Christianity—its exemplary historical manifestation. Thus, faith is not essentially the acceptance of the historical form of Christianity. Rather, it is simply the obedient acceptance of one's supernaturally-elevated self-transcendence.<sup>15</sup> Anyone who does not close themselves off from this transcendence can find salvation, even if they are not explicit Christians.

Given this understanding of revelation, we turn now more explicitly to the topic of the supernatural existential by asking Rahner's characteristic question: "What must be true about human nature for there to be the possibility of experiencing God not only as Question (i.e., natural revelation) but also as Intimate, Forgiving Presence?" Rahner's most succinct answer to this question is as follows:

God wishes to communicate himself . . . so God makes a creature whom he can love: he creates man. He creates him in such a way that he *can* receive this love which is God himself, and that he can and must at the same time accept it for what it is: the ever astounding wonder, the unexpected, unexacted gift.<sup>16</sup>

In *Hearers of the Word*, Rahner begins an extended development of this answer. He establishes two conditions for the possibility of revelation which closely parallel the distinction between natural and supernatural revelation. The first of these conditions is that human nature must possess a transcendence, an openness to receive a spiritual communication. The second is that this transcendence must be raised or illuminated before humans can receive a spiritual communication of the intensity proper to the Divine.<sup>17</sup>

*Hearers of the Word* is devoted to establishing the first condition but Rahner develops it in such a way that the inherent possibility of the second condition is affirmed. However, he does not try to derive this second condition from his analysis of

human nature per se because he considers it “an inner illumination of spiritual subjectivity with regard to transcendence itself, without being able to be posited from this subjectivity.”<sup>18</sup>

Far from being a natural component of human nature, Rahner affirms that the possibility of receiving the supernatural revelation of God’s intimacy is dependent upon the God of grace being already at work in the person. For, “man can never even begin to have anything to do with God or to approach God without being already borne by God’s grace.”<sup>19</sup> Likewise, “only when God is the subjective principle of the speaking and of man’s hearing in faith can God in his own self express himself.”<sup>20</sup> The thoroughness of this claim for Rahner is manifest in his conviction that the self-communication of God to spiritual creatures is supernatural and gratuitous even *prior* to sin.<sup>21</sup> Equally important, however, is that this offer of self-communication with humanity remains operative despite the guilty rejections of it seen in the Fall.<sup>22</sup>

Only now do we come to the crucial element of Rahner’s conception of the supernatural existential. While he affirms that the ability to receive an immediate self-communication from God that is more than God’s presence as Question is not a part of human nature per se, he is unwilling to conceive of it as merely a matter of divine intention which has no ontological effect on human existence. Rather, he stresses that “it consists not only in the thoughts and intentions of God, but in a real ontological determination of man himself . . . (it) belongs to man’s being as ‘nature’.”<sup>23</sup> Rahner establishes this crucial point of the basis of a fundamental principle that the end (*telos*) of any being *must* have an ontological effect on that being. Thus:

If God gives creation and man above all a supernatural end and this end is first ‘in intentione’, then man *is* by that very fact always and everywhere inwardly other in structure than he would be if he did not have this end, and hence other as well before he reached this end partially (the grace which justifies) or wholly (the beatific vision).<sup>24</sup>

The “end” offered to humanity is the possibility of experiencing the immediate self-communication of God and thus, ultimately, the beatific vision. The effect of the very existence of this end *as an offer* is that, even prior to a person’s response to it, it stamps and determines our nature and lends us a character which Rahner calls the “supernatural existential.”<sup>25</sup>

There is an important point to be noticed here. The supernatural existential is not saving grace itself being given to the person but only God’s *offer* of grace which, by ontologically modifying the soul, enables us to freely accept or reject saving grace.<sup>26</sup> As Rahner puts it, “man’s transcendence is ‘elevated’ by

God's self-communication as an *offer* to man's freedom."<sup>27</sup> The importance of this distinction is that it makes clear that Rahner is avoiding a view reminiscent of some Calvinists which makes a person's choice for God *entirely* God choosing God. While there is an element of truth in such a view, in that humans in their fallen condition cannot effect an immediate relationship with God in their own power, Rahner is careful to preserve the necessary place of human choice as, at least, a secondary cause in the acceptance of grace. At this point he is very reminiscent of the struggles of Arminius and Wesley against such a Calvinistic viewpoint.

The supernatural existential is then, as the Heideggerian term "existential" implies, an ontological determination of the very being of the human person which makes possible that person's acceptance of God's gracious offer of intimate self-presence. It is, however, a determination of human nature which is properly *supernatural* because it finds its cause in God's offer of communication and not in human nature per se.

The best way to further summarize and explain Rahner's doctrine of the supernatural existential is to look at the arguments he gives for accepting his viewpoint. In reality, he makes only one primary argument and then four arguments from "fittingness."<sup>28</sup> His primary argument is the one we have already referred to; namely, that the "end" of a being must effect a change in the ontological nature of that being. He argues that to make God's ordination of humanity to a supernatural end merely a juridical and not a moral entity is nothing short of nominalism.<sup>29</sup>

Of more immediate interest are his arguments from fittingness. The first of these is that it is only by positing something like his supernatural existential that one can explain the possibility of the punishment of the damned, for "the loss of a good . . . can only be felt as a painful evil when the loser wills it *freely*."<sup>30</sup>

Related to this, he argues that one must accept something like the supernatural existential to handle the possibility of the universal availability of salvation—a position endorsed by the Second Vatican Council. Rahner feels so strongly about the necessity of accepting the universal salvific will of God that he claims we must profess belief in this if we wish to be Christians—not only in a pre-Fall sense but precisely in the post-paradisean phase of salvation which is dominated by original sin.<sup>31</sup> Against those who would limit God's gracious salvific will to less than all humankind, he argues that "theology has been too long and too often bedeviled by the unavowed assumption that grace would no longer be grace if it were too generously distributed by the love of God!"<sup>32</sup>

His third argument is that the supernatural existential provides a fitting explanation for the possibility of good in sinners. As Rahner puts it: "(A person) may be a sinner and an

unbeliever. But where and insofar as he has the concrete possibility of a morally good act, he is in fact constantly within the open horizon of transcendence towards the God of the supernatural life.<sup>33</sup>

Rahner's final argument from fittingness refers to the (for him, demonstrable) common human experience of transcendence as more than just a Question. It must be noted here that while Rahner holds that all persons have God's *offer* of self-communication as a modality of their subjectivity, it is present only in an unthematic way and cannot be encountered as an object. Thus, while a person may not be able to discover this gracious self-communication of the Divine by simple introspection, when a theological and dogmatic interpretation of this transcendental experience is offered to the person by the history of revelation and Christianity, he or she can recognize their own experience in it.<sup>34</sup> Understood in this way, the failure of most people to have explicit consciousness of the existence of God's offer of self-communication is not seen by Rahner as an argument against his claim.

### *Parallels to Wesley's Prevenient Grace*

For those familiar with Wesley's understanding of prevenient grace, the preceding summary of Rahner should have suggested several points of apparent agreement between the two conceptions.

Wesley understood humanity, subsequent to the Fall, to be totally depraved and, therefore, incapable of even willing to seek God's forgiveness and do God's will. As such, if one was to recognize their fallenness and seek God's forgiveness, it could only be as a result of a supernatural gift of God's grace. The ability to exercise faith in God's offer of forgiveness in Christ is not one innate to humanity but rather a "supernatural gift of God."<sup>35</sup> At the same time, Wesley was very concerned to establish a place for human responsibility and freedom in the process of salvation. He did so through the distinction between saving grace and prevenient grace.

Prevenient grace is that gracious provision of God to all humankind which restores them to such a condition that they can hear, respond to, and be held accountable for God's offer of salvation in Christ. It is not itself saving grace but rather the gracious "effect" of the presence of God's offer of forgiveness on all persons, such that they are given the possibility to respond to that offer--a possibility not inherently their own.<sup>36</sup> The parallels between this distinction and Rahner's distinction between the supernatural existential and saving faith are obvious.

The similarities can be further demonstrated by noting Wesley's parallels to the arguments Rahner advanced for accepting

he supernatural existential. To be sure, Wesley never presents an argument akin to Rahner's discussion of the necessary effect of the end of a being on the ontological nature of the being. This argument presupposes a philosophical system with which Wesley was not intimately at home. Besides, for Wesley scriptural and experiential arguments were more significant. Thus, Rahner's arguments from fittingness provide more fruitful comparisons.

First, like Rahner, Wesley appeals to his doctrine of prevenient grace as necessary to explain the possibility of the judgment of sinners. Prevenient grace accounts for the (restored) human ability to respond to or culpably reject God's offer of forgiveness. Without such an ability, humans could never be held responsible, and thus could not be condemned.<sup>37</sup>

Second, Wesley shares Rahner's conviction of the universal possibility of salvation and argues that prevenient grace is what makes this available.<sup>38</sup> In terms of the debate at the Synod of Dort, Wesley holds to a universal as opposed to a limited atonement, and it is his doctrine of prevenient grace which makes this possible.

Third, like Rahner, Wesley understands his doctrine of prevenient grace to account for the possibility of good deeds on the part of non-Christians. If there is good to be found in the heathen, it is only because Christ is already at work in them in a hidden way through prevenient grace.<sup>39</sup> Wesley even appears to go so far as to say that the heathen will be judged in terms of what "light" they do have through prevenient grace—though his remarks in this connection are brief and somewhat cryptic.<sup>40</sup>

Finally, Wesley presents a position analogous to Rahner's assertion of the common human experience of transcendence when he claims that there is present in all people a basic knowledge of the existence of God and of God's attributes,<sup>41</sup> along with the universal experience of freedom and responsibility<sup>42</sup>—all the product of prevenient grace.

### *The Significant Difference*

Given these areas of agreement between Rahner and Wesley, it might appear that we have discovered a point of convergence between Roman Catholic and Wesleyan theology. However, without denying that there are grounds here for significant dialogue, it is necessary to proceed now to a discussion of the apparent significant difference between the two positions and its implication. Truly responsible dialogue must grapple with such differences rather than merely glossing them over.

This difference might best be revealed in the form of a Wesleyan-Arminian critique of Rahner's position. Essentially, such a critique would find Rahner's treatment of original sin inadequate. At first, this might strike one as not directly

relevant to Rahner's understanding of the supernatural existential. However, it must be remembered that the actual human situation is one that is always *co*-determined by grace and by sin. The implication of this is that one's understanding of grace will correspond to one's understanding of sin. Therefore, it is relevant to seek to understand Rahner's view of original sin and its implications for the supernatural existential.

Rahner focuses his presentation on original sin on the undeniable fact that "the guilt of others is a permanent factor in the situation and realm of the individual's freedom."<sup>43</sup> Essentially, what he means by this is that a person's wrong actions are not merely subjective matters but become objectified in the world and thereby become determining factors in the decisions and freedom of other persons. The presence of this objectified guilt can threaten the freedom of another's decisions, having a seductive influence upon it and thus making a free decision difficult.<sup>44</sup>

The assertion of Christianity is that this co-determination of every person by the guilt of others is something that is universal, permanent, and therefore, original.<sup>45</sup> Thus, what is "original" about original sin is not that some primeval act of sin has been transmitted to all subsequent generations in its moral quality,<sup>46</sup> but that the historical situation of every free human decision is always co-determined by grace *and* guilt.<sup>47</sup>

From a Wesleyan perspective, there are two serious deficiencies in Rahner's understanding of original sin. The first deals with the issue of the extent of the corruption of human nature arising from original sin. Rahner is representative of the typical Roman Catholic position that even in the Fall humanity retains some "natural" freedom which need merely be supplemented to make saving faith possible. Wesley, on the other hand, insists on the total corruption of human nature by original sin (or inherited depravity), as a result of which prevenient grace must serve a (partial) restoring function if humans are to be free to respond to God.<sup>48</sup>

Admittedly, both Rahner's "natural" humanity and Wesley's "total corruption" are abstract theological concepts which have no direct referent in human existence. Their truth claim resides more in what they defend than in what they describe. Moreover, in the final analysis, Wesley and Rahner present the *actual* human situation in similar terms: burdened by sin but capable of response to God. However, the Wesleyan approach would seem to provide a greater safeguard against the charge of Pelagianism. In light of the Fall, it reemphasizes that any human ability to serve or choose God must be seen as a result of and response to God graciously choosing us first. And yet, it does this in a way that preserves human responsibility.<sup>49</sup>



The second aspect of Rahner's treatment of original sin that seems deficient from a Wesleyan perspective is its predominately external character. There is no denying the fact that much of the present human dilemma is the sinful environment in which we find ourselves. However, Paul seems to point to a much more personal core for this problem, located in the very center of human existence. We are not only *deprived* of guidance and support in our quest for our transcendental End, our very human nature (reason, will, emotions, etc) has been distorted and *depraved* to the point that we have become slaves to sin (Romans 6-8).

In light of Paul, Wesley treats original sin as much more than the lack of the immediate presence of God and the overwhelming presence of an evil environment. Ultimately, he sees it as a universal propensity among fallen humanity to place self-centered considerations above the call of God toward intimate fellowship and service. It is a deprivation of our essential human nature to the extent that we cannot, in our own power, love and serve God or others. To escape this deprivation we are ultimately dependent upon an act of God's freeing and empowering grace.

These Wesleyan critiques of Rahner's understanding of original sin suggest, by corollary, the major difference between Rahner's supernatural existential and Wesley's prevenient grace; and thereby, the major difference between Roman Catholic and Wesleyan understandings of grace in general.

Rahner and Wesley are united in their rejection of any understanding of grace which emphasizes its imputed nature in such a way that all effects on human nature are undercut (a tendency sensed by both in the Reformed and Lutheran traditions).<sup>50</sup> Both prevenient grace and the supernatural existential are presented as instances of the *transforming* grace of God on human lives. However, the emphases of these two instances are quite different. Prevenient grace deals almost exclusively with the provision for the forgiving and reconciling work of grace in the lives of deprived human beings, while the supernatural existential focuses primarily on the necessary basis for the sanctifying or completing work of grace upon incomplete but already good human subjects.<sup>51</sup>

To be sure, these two aspects of grace cannot be totally separated. However, they are significantly distinct moments of the total work of God's grace and deserve individual focus. Accordingly, Wesley supplements his discussion of prevenient grace with accounts of converting and then sanctifying grace.<sup>52</sup> By contrast, such a distinction or supplementation is not readily evident in Rahner. His entire discussion of grace is formulated from the perspective of sanctification or the spiritual development of good but incomplete human persons. This strikes Wesleyan

theologians as a fatal distortion of the fuller doctrine of grace.

Essentially then, the question the Wesleyan tradition puts to Rahner (and Roman Catholic theology as a whole) is whether the place to begin building a doctrine of grace is exclusively from the side of the ultimate end to which it leads, i.e., the beatific vision. Should not more attention be paid to the scriptural teachings on the corruption of sin and the resulting alienated situation of fallen humanity?

If this were done, then the supernatural existential would be given a heightened and special significance in the post-paradisical world, handling more than just the problem of how a creature (even a paradisaical creature) can respond to the call of God towards a supernatural end. It would focus much more on the problem of how we fallen creatures can be both convicted of the sinfulness of our actions and convinced of the gracious forgiveness and acceptance offered to us through Christ—an acceptance which then leads us into a life called toward the supernatural goal of God’s Reign.

## ENDNOTES

1. Colin Williams, *John Wesley’s Theology Today* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1960), 46.

2. Note how Rahner is chosen as the exemplary contemporary Catholic theologian in John and Denise Carmody, *Contemporary Catholic Theology* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980), 4ff. For a summary of the Catholic responses to Rahner’s doctrine of the supernatural existential (some critical), see Karl Eberhard, *Karl Rahner’s Doctrine of the Supernatural Existential* (Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms, 1971), chapter six; and Carl J. Peters, “The Position of Karl Rahner Regarding the Supernatural,” *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 20 (1965): 81–94.

3. The primary sources are: “Existential, Übernatürliches,” *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche* 3:1301; “Concerning the Relationship between Nature and Grace,” *Theological Investigations* (New York: Seabury, 1974) 1:297–318; “Nature and Grace,” *Theological Investigations* 4:166–84; and relevant sections of *Foundations of Christian Faith* (New York: Seabury, 1978).

4. Eberhard, *Rahner’s Doctrine*.

5. Rahner, *Foundations*, 32.

6. *Ibid.*, 42.

7. *Ibid.*, 34–35.

8. Cf. *Ibid.*, 454.

9. *Ibid.*, 170.

10. Cf. *Ibid.*, 149.

11. *Ibid.*, 171.
12. *Ibid.*, 269.
13. *Ibid.*, 146.
14. *A Rahner Reader*, ed. Gerald McCool (New York: Seabury, 1975), 183.
15. Rahner, *Foundations*, 152.
16. Rahner, *Theological Investigations* 1:310.
17. Cf. Eberhard, *Rahner's Doctrine*, 125.
18. Karl Rahner, *Hearers of the Word* (New York: Herder, 1969), 10.
19. Rahner, *Foundations*, 146.
20. *Ibid.*, 150.
21. *Ibid.*, 124.
22. *Ibid.*, 162.
23. *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche* 3:1301.
24. Rahner, *Theological Investigations* 1:302–3.
25. *A Rahner Reader*, 213.
26. *Ibid.*, see McCool's summary on p. 185.
27. Rahner, *Foundations*, 148–49.
28. Eberhard, *Rahner's Doctrine*, 173–74.
29. Rahner, *Theological Investigations* 1:312fn1.
30. *Ibid.*
31. *A Rahner Reader*, 216.
32. *Ibid.*, 182.
33. *Ibid.*
34. Rahner, *Foundations*, 131.
35. Wesley, *Works* (Jackson) 7:187–88.
36. See Charles Rogers, *The Concept of Prevenient Grace in the Theology of John Wesley* (Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms, 1968), especially the sections on the “mature” Wesley.
37. *Works* (Jackson) 10:463–64. Cf. Rogers, *Concept*, 189–96.
38. *Works* (Jackson) 6:512, 7:87, 7:345, 9:273.
39. *Works* (Jackson) 6:206, 7:188.
40. *Works* (Jackson) 8:337, 285. Cf. Rogers, *Concept*, 243–47 on the question of the salvation of the heathen.
41. *NT Notes*, Romans 1:19–20.
42. *Works* (Jackson) 7:228.
43. Rahner, *Foundations*, 107.
44. *Ibid.*, 109.
45. *Ibid.*
46. *Ibid.*, 110.
47. *Ibid.*, 114.
48. This distinction has been carefully argued in Donal Dorr, “Total Corruption in the Wesleyan Tradition,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 31 (1964): 303–21. See especially p. 317. It is the “restoring” function of prevenient grace which helps Wesley counter the overly pessimistic view of human nature which Rahner and the Catholic tradition as a whole have

found so unacceptable in the Reformed tradition. Cf. *Foundations*, 147.

49. For a discussion of how such a move helps Wesley hold grace and human responsibility in a creative and ecumenically-promising tension see Randy L. Maddox, “Responsible Grace: The Systematic Nature of Wesley’s Theology Reconsidered,” *Quarterly Review* 6 (1986): 24–34.

50. Cf. Carmody, *Catholic Theology*, 93–94.

51. Cf. *Ibid.*, 11.

52. Cf. Harald Lindström, *Wesley and Sanctification* (Wilmore, KY: Francis Asbury Press, 1980), 113–20.