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WORKSHOP PAPER

Christian Understandings of the 'Other': An Unfashionable Defence of Karl Rahner's 'Anonymous Christians'

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In our days Christians are no closer to a consensus on the theological underpinnings of Jewish-Christian dialogue or wider interfaith relations. Perennially popular is the insistence that Judaism and Christianity, and perhaps other faiths, are equal and equivalent in all ways, operating within parallel covenants. Critics of these 'pluralist' theologies point out how they often mask their own contentious choices, and lead swiftly to agnosticism. Another option has been 'inclusivism'. In one definitive presentation, Karl Rahner argued that the Christian must understand the religious 'other' as in some senses an 'anonymous Christian'. It is easy to see why this position is unfashionable. This paper will nevertheless argue that to dismiss it out-of-hand - as a morally reprehensible colonisation of 'the other' - distorts the debate in several ways. Further, different but analogous theories are found within Judaism (e.g. the liturgy, Rambam, Rosenzweig). All that said, Rahner can be criticised for paying insufficient attention to the argument that Judaism is, for Christians, unique, not one of the set of 'non-Christian religions'. Allowing for this would mean that a chastened 'inclusivism' can never be neat or final. Thus the paper seeks to offer reasoned provocation, to help the group towards a full, frank, and properly nuanced discussion.

I'd like us to think a little about the logic of Christian and Jewish religious claims, in particular, claims about 'the other'. It is a commonplace to argue that traditional Judaism and traditional Christianity start in very different places. The Christian has argued: 'outside the church there is no salvation'.¹ The Jew has insisted: 'the righteous of all the nations have a place in the world to come'.² This certainly has the appearance of radical difference, and is reinforced by the historical fact that mainstream Christians have sensed a mission to make all peoples and all persons Christian, whereas rabbinic Judaism has never sought to make all Jews. My contention is that this polarisation is a good way in to the questions, and (yet) not the final answer.

I am going to speak as a Christian and not be too apologetic about Christian terminology. But of course all the substance is offered as grist to your mill. I make some hypotheses for your deconstruction. But if the very idea of Christian theological argument is beyond the Pale for you, this is in truth probably not the workshop for you.

Christians involved in Jewish-Christian relations, and/or the wider interfaith movement, are often embarrassed by the portrayal of Christian thinking sketched out above. They tend to see any attempt to presume that Christianity is normative for all is arrogant. It is either aggressive and manipulative ('agree with me or you're going to hell') or arrogant and colonising ('inasmuch as you are right, you already agree with me, though you don't know it'). These positions are often called exclusivism and inclusivism respectively. As such, they are often contrasted with a third position, pluralism, which holds that the two faiths – or maybe all faiths – are equal, equivalent, parallel, without any superiority/inferiority.³

¹ Cyprian (200-58), *The Unity of the Catholic Church*. In context, Cyprian's focus is schismatics and heretics, and so the phrase can mean 'those who move outside the church remove themselves from salvation'. Certainly, the Catholic Church has never claimed to know that anyone deceased is or will be in hell. So the *prima facie* meaning of the text is unlikely as definitive teaching. At its broadest, it has been taken as meaning 'wherever there is salvation, there is the church, even if in embryonic and inchoate form'. See Sullivan, Francis A, 1992, *Salvation Outside the Church? Tracing the History of the Catholic Response*, London: Geoffrey Chapman

² Tosefta *Sanhedrin* 13:2; cf. the Rambam *Hil. Teshuvah* 3.5

³ The origins of this threefold paradigm are attributed to Race. Race, Alan, 1983, *Christians and Religious Pluralism in the Christian Theology of Religions*, London: SCM; enlarged second addition, 1993.) Others have found the shape of the argument, though not the terminology in early Hick (see below). For an overview setting out, augmenting, and defending the threefold typology against critics, see Race, Alan and Hedges, Paul M, 2009, *SCM Core Text: Christian Approaches to Other Faiths*, London: SCM.

Only a fool would be against 'pluralism' in a blanket way. But it is important to distinguish the different meanings, or layers of meaning, of the word. I myself find certainly no less than four.

1. There is pluralism of fact. We live in a world where we are bound to meet and interact with people of different faiths. Whether we would choose this or not, it is likely to be our reality (in one way or another – they – 'others' – will be on our screens if not in our village). We all find ways of adapting to this reality. This pluralism requires tolerance/toleration, but not necessarily more.

2. There is pluralism of process. Once we have accepted, and quite possibly welcomed the pluralism of fact, we may want some kind of more serious engagement, even dialogue, even formal dialogue. In all such dialogues, it is essential that each party is afforded the same rights and dignity. Thus the *modus operandi* is that each person is equal, and their views are to be heard in all seriousness. The response which follows such a hearing may well include layers of disagreement. But any heading that presents a dialogue as 'my truth meeting your error' is illegitimate. Many, from all kinds of theological backgrounds, are adept at this pluralism of process, which moves us beyond tolerance to real respect for the other as the other is.

3. There is the pluralism of hope. Once that respect has borne fruit, one will find that the dialogue partner has become a friend. You are enriched by their insights and will want the best for them. You will not be able to dismiss their religious convictions *in toto*. You may admire and like their convictions. Spiritual envy is not impossible. It is natural in this context to hope that, at a level perhaps beyond full articulation, you are both right. You have different but equivalent heritages; you were both formed by different experiences, but these are secondary to all that you have in common. The move is beyond respect to affirmation.

4. There is, then and only then, the pluralism of content. This takes the hope of the pluralism of hope, and says it is a truth, or the truth. Not only does one want to wish that we are on different paths up the same mountain, stretching out towards the same summit, but one holds this to be the case. This might also be called ideological pluralism, whereas 2-3, and arguably 1, are forms of methodological pluralism. The move is beyond affirmation to conviction, theology or philosophy.

While it is perfectly natural and noble to attempt the move from hope to conviction, it has proved very difficult to give real content to pluralism, so understood. It is not hard to see why: at any level one cares to take, the different faiths seem to be saying different things. If they are all equivalent 'deep down' (if that is more than our earnest

hope, if we believe this is something we can demonstrate), one either has to challenge certain faiths' self-understandings, or present an essential common-ground which has all the qualities of the lowest common denominator. Since even this lowest common denominator is likely to be contested (given Buddhism, for example, it certainly cannot be 'God'), one soon finds oneself moving towards agnosticism. ('We agree there is something beyond us, but we agree we can say nothing at all about it.' But an x about which nothing can be said is indistinguishable from non-x; it is redundant to our dialogue.)

So what of the middle position, inclusivism? It is most obviously associated with the thinking of Karl Rahner SJ. He argued that non-Christian persons might be thought of – and in some ways must be thought of – as 'anonymous Christians'. It is not hard to see how this language is open to the charge of being arrogant and a form of theological colonisation. It is not my purpose to defend Rahner's theology in detail, still less his choice of terminology. It is my purpose here to contend that if Rahner's inclusivism is dismissed out-of-hand, as immoral or arbitrary, it is likely that babies are thrown out with the bathwater. In fact, I further contend, the same kind of 'inclusivist' logic is found in many theories which present themselves as 'pluralist', and is found, differently, in rabbinic Judaism, (once, that is, it is allowed that there are more ways of thinking about the 'other' than asking who has a share in the world to come).

So, I will:

- 1) present Rahner's thought, as spelled out in one brief article from a lecture in 1961;⁴
- 2) offer some commentary to head off some obvious confusions;
- 3) spell out why I think the underlying logic is sound;
- 4) draw some analogies with Jewish thought;
- 5) offer some refinement of Rahner's thought.

1. Presentation of Rahner's Theses

Rahner is not an easy theologian. The premises on which he builds his theology of other religions involve complex understandings of nature, grace, and the human longing and capacity for transcendence, in short: a whole theological anthropology.⁵ Yet it might be suggested –

⁴ Rahner, Karl, 1966, 'Christianity and the non-Christian Religions', in *Theological Investigations*, volume 5, London: Darton, Longman and Todd, London, 115-134. This seminal work consists of notes of a lecture delivered in 1961, i.e. significantly before the Second Vatican Council. Below, cited as 'Lecture'.

⁵ For an example of the complexities involved, see Rahner, Karl, 1961, 'Concerning the Relationship Between Nature and Grace', in *Theological Investigations*, volume 1, London: DLT, 297-317.

controversially – that the statements spelled out in his seminal essay, 'Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions', can be detached from his greater networks of thought. Certainly, for these purposes, they shall be. The paper is famous for its four theses (and forgive the exclusive language of its translator's day, on top of everything else): One:

Christianity understands itself as the absolute religion, intended for all men, which cannot recognize any other religion beside itself as of equal right... Christianity is God's own interpretation in his Word of this relationship of God to man founded in Christ by God himself.⁶

So far, so brutal, we might think. But the emphasis in the next sentence is crucial:

And so Christianity can recognize itself as the true and lawful religion for all men *only* where and when it enters with existential power and demanding force into the realm of another religion...⁷

There follows an insistence that Christianity has its own prehistory. So it has not always been this way, concretely and explicitly. And the question is raised whether the emergence of Christianity as the 'absolute' religion, the religion of God's own making in history, happens for all people at the same time. This is raised with great caution, but it is hard to see how it could be answered affirmatively with confidence.

What of those who have never heard the name of Jesus? Or those who hear it mixed up with violence or other sins? Or merely from people acting out of well-intentioned wrong-headedness? In short, must it not be said that the 'Pentecost moment', when the absoluteness of Christianity becomes an existential reality, upon which one's salvation depends, can and does happen *at different times for different people*? Once that is allowed, can it be denied that this moment's presence or absence is a mystery within each human heart, as such (normally) hidden from even the Church's wisest saint?⁸

⁶ Lecture, 116.

⁷ *ibid*, emphasis added.

⁸ Talk of spiritual realities hidden in the human heart can readily be criticised from a Wittgensteinian perspective. The idea of a pre-linguistic or extra-linguistic and therefore in the strict sense a private experience cannot survive Wittgenstein's analysis of the social and public nature of all language and the saturation of all experience in language. See Kerr, Fergus, 1997, *Theology after Wittgenstein*, second edition, London: SPCK. Kerr is especially critical of Rahner. Yet the language is here to be understood heuristically. (Rahner may have been more a practical theologian, thinking of Jesuit pastoral and missionary practice, than Kerr allows.) Of course, any engagement with grace will be visible and public *in some ways*. But the Church – to stress, even at its holiest and wisest – has no means of measuring the reception and

The second thesis picks this up:

Until the moment when the gospel really enters into the historical situation of an individual, a non-Christian religion (even outside the Mosaic religion) does not merely contain elements of a natural knowledge of God, elements, moreover, mixed up with human depravity which is the result of original sin and later aberrations. It contains also supernatural elements arising out of the grace which is given to men as a gratuitous gift on account of Christ. For this reason a non-Christian religion can be recognized as a lawful [*legitim*] religion (although only in different degrees) without thereby denying the error and depravity contained in it.⁹

Rahner's reasoning is based on Christian conviction concerning the nature of God, who wills all to be saved.¹⁰ Thus God must offer grace to all (though it might be rejected), in the concrete setting in which they find themselves (rather than through communicating with some putative disembodied soul).

The third thesis:

If the second thesis is correct, then Christianity does not simply confront the member of an extra-Christian religion as a mere non-Christian but as someone who can and must already be regarded in this or that respect as an anonymous Christian.¹¹

God who graciously wills all people to be saved is the God who communicates the divine self in Christ. Therefore all grace is in Christ, and all graced human beings are – at least to the extent that they make grace their own – in Christ.

I give you the fourth thesis, although in some senses the third provides (at least for our purposes) the real climax:

It is possibly too much to hope, on the one hand, that the religious pluralism which exists in the concrete situation of Christians will disappear in the foreseeable future. On the other hand, it is nevertheless absolutely permissible for the Christian himself to interpret this non-Christianity as Christianity of an anonymous kind which he does always still go out to meet as a missionary, seeing it

non-reception of grace. The ways in which grace becomes present and manifest are *literally endlessly varied*.

⁹ Lecture, 121

¹⁰ Most directly in 1 Timothy 2:4, though it is not an argument based on this proof text of any string of such texts.

¹¹ Lecture 131.

as a world which is to be brought to the explicit consciousness of what already belongs to it as a divine offer or already pertains to it also over and above this as a divine gift of grace accepted unreflectedly and implicitly.¹²

2. Commentary

a) You may be struck by the caution with which Rahner moves. There seems to be little here of the confident openness and generous optimism of the Second Vatican Council. Contrast the beginning of *Nostra Aetate*:

The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions. She has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and doctrines which, although differing in many ways from her own teaching, nevertheless often reflect a ray of truth which enlightens all...¹³

But Rahner is delivering his lecture *before* the Second Vatican Council, before, in his view, the Church had spoken definitively about such things.¹⁴ Rahner is famously one of the major influences on the Council, and reviewed its documents positively afterwards. We may confidently say that this later more confident spirit is closer to the heart of his position.¹⁵

b) It should be clear that Rahner nowhere recommends that Christians go about calling non-Christians 'anonymous Christians'. That is neither required, nor sought. Rather, Rahner is engaging in some in-house thinking, actually as a Christian missiologist (remember, he is a Jesuit).¹⁶

¹² Lecture 133.

¹³ Flannery, Austin, 1992, *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, 2nd edition, Dominican, Dublin, 739.

¹⁴ There is no need to interpret this cynically, as if Rahner were less intimidated after the Council. It is possible to believe that he spoke at his most cautious before the Council, as his conscientiously believed the Church had not spoken definitively about these themes. Once the Church did speak definitively, he was as obligated to abandon the earlier caution and speak with confidence.

¹⁵ This is seen most clearly in Rahner's insistence that, following the Council, the Christian can be clear that even the avowed atheist can find salvation. He explicitly says this is a *novum* of the Council, and clearly welcomes it. Rahner, Karl, 1972, 'Atheism and Implicit Christianity', in *Theological Investigations*, volume 9, London: DLT, 145-164

¹⁶ I do disassociate myself from those who say that to be called an anonymous or implicit member of a faith by an explicit member of the same is always and everywhere offensive. I once asked a Hindu pandit who is a Hindu. He replied that I was a Hindu, as (so he believed) a person of goodwill. Yet more remarkably perhaps, I once went to a Reform synagogue on Shabbat, where it was known I was a Christian who would be going to church the next day. One congregant said of this:

c) Thus it should be as clear that Rahner is not calling for an end to all Christian mission. At no point does he claim to know that all non-Christians - or any particular non-Christian - is saved. He is not naively saying that all people are godly, if you look hard enough. He is describing what must be possible, not inevitable. There is still a case for mission, to offer the benefits of making explicit what is only implicit, with all the chances for a fuller engagement which follow from that.¹⁷

d) Even if one rejects the theory overall, we can note that psychologically it is at least as likely to work against arrogance as for it. Within Rahner's frame, the working assumption must be that non-Christian you meet is already graced by God in some ways. As such, they may have precisely the piece of wisdom you need at a particular point in your own spiritual journey.¹⁸

e) Commentators on Rahner often debate what he says about the role in which the non-Christian religion as such plays in conveying the grace of which he speaks. Might the religion be *constitutive* of grace, or is it merely the *circumstance* where God's grace, unseen, enters in?¹⁹ My own position is that he is clear – not only in this essay, but especially elsewhere – that it is normally likely to be the other's religion which is the concrete, incarnate means by which a person responds to God's grace and so is saved and healed. One example:

If revelation properly so-called is not possible without faith in the strict sense and must be offered always and everywhere... then such revelation and such faith... occur *concretely* and *on the whole* only by the mediation of those categorical, institutional, and verbal realities which we know as the non-Christian religions.²⁰

'You are a real Reform Jew!' I did not pursue all the theological implications of this statement. I recognised it as a warm compliment to be received as such.

¹⁷ See Rahner, Karl, 1974, 'Anonymous Christianity and the Missionary Task of the Church', in *Theological Investigations*, volume 12, 161-178. Rahner gives substantial evidence that the Church has always believed that its sacramental life is always a catching-up with what God has already been doing in the person who is desirous of the sacraments, be it (say) confession or baptism. The journey from inchoate desire of the sacrament to sacramental fulfilment can be a long one. But, for Rahner, it is the direction of travel which is crucial and which justifies the missionary task.

¹⁸ This is my inference. I am not claiming to have read this claim explicitly in Rahner.

¹⁹ Cf., for example, D'Costa, Gavin, 1985, 'Karl Rahner's Anonymous Christian: A Reappraisal', *Modern Theology*, 1:2, 131-148

²⁰ Rahner, Karl, 1984, 'On the Importance of the Non-Christian Religions for Salvation', in *Theological Investigations*, volume 18, London: DLT, 293. The emphasis is original. The next sentence (293f) reads: 'In man, his transcendental, mental, and supernatural relationship to God is always mediated by categorical realities of his life, and in the last resort the most sublime and formless mysticism is no exception to this.'

f) Finally, and crucially, I want to say that Rahner expresses his case with some genius. Remember how he begins, his first thesis. He is able to come alongside the ecclesiocentric conservative (who believes that the Church and only the Church is the ark of salvation in a sea of damned sinfulness), and show them how, through taking seriously the reality of who we all are as concrete and historical beings, they must in fact think of persons of other faiths as (at least potentially) already partners with God. Moreover, they must allow for this, however different and 'un-Christian' the other seems to be, for it comes from theological-anthropological *a priori* principles, not from any *a posteriori* phenomenological conclusions.

3. Evaluation

Now, I am not and never have been such an ecclesiocentric conservative. And so I have no need to start where Rahner starts. However, I offer to you the hypothesis that the underlying structure of his argument is ethically and logically sound.

Much confusion about Rahner's theory, and about inclusivism more generally, centres on the ease with which Christian thinking can blur questions of truth and questions of salvation. We can spell it out like this (though it is an oversimplification, and there are perhaps as many variations within each school of thought as between):

- a) In exclusivism ('only Christians are saved'), the visible Church is, at its best, the locus of *all* orienting (or criteria-setting) *truth*, and *all* *salvation*.
- b) In inclusivism (all may be saved, but all are saved in Christ), the visible Church is, at its best, the locus of *all* orienting *truth*, but *not* of all *salvation*.²¹
- c) In pluralism (all may be saved, by Christ or other means), the visible Church is, at its best, the locus of only *some* orienting *truth*, and only *some* *salvation*.

I do understand how, when spelled out this way, pluralism is likely to seem the most attractive, reasonable, and humble option. But I think it cannot avoid some dilemmas.

If the Church (at its best) is not the locus of all orienting truth, what is? If that question cannot be answered, then our theology has collapsed into relativism. Another name for this relativism is of course agnosticism.

²¹ The obvious complication is the qualifier 'at its best'. The Church only moves towards its best when it responds properly to criticisms from within and without (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*). So, along the way, even within inclusivism, truth comes from outside the Church too. Nevertheless, the argument is that the criteria to judge such truths were always *in principle* available to the Church. There is no truth which is not in Christ.

And this is not agnosticism in the colloquial sense of humble self-doubt. This is agnosticism in the technical sense. It is itself the unshakeable conviction that it is not possible to find any fundamentally orienting truth about God.

So again I ask: If the Church is not the locus of all orienting truth, what is? Here an answer must be given. Some possible answers which self-defining pluralists have given have been:

- a) the generic 'God' behind all the great world faiths (middle-stage John Hick)²²
 - b) the experience of salvation as altruism (late-stage John Hick)²³
 - c) the experience of socio-political liberation from oppression (Knitter)²⁴
 - d) the common mystical experience (diverse pioneers).²⁵
- The problem is that, wherever this orienting truth is located, its location creates a second dilemma:

Can one deny this orienting truth, and still be saved? (Whatever it is, it will be controversial.) If not, then one is an exclusivist, albeit a non-Christian (or more-than-Christian) exclusivist. If so, then one is an inclusivist, albeit a non-Christian (or more-than-Christian) inclusivist.

In summary, then, a pluralism which articulates a coherent case, and makes truth-claims about God or transcendence or the good life or what really counts (i.e. which does not collapse into relativism) will be *exclusive* about its own truth-claims as *truth*, and (probably) *inclusive* about those who reject the same truth claims as possible recipients of *salvation*. It may just possibly be logically exclusivist. But it most certainly does not transcend the logic of inclusivism. It is a variant of inclusivism.²⁶

²² Hick, John, 1993, *God and the Universe of Faiths*, 4th edition, Oxford: Oneworld. The first edition was in 1973.

²³ Hick, John, 1989, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*, Basingstoke: Macmillan

²⁴ Knitter, Paul F, 1995, *One Earth Many Religions: Multifaith Dialogue and Global Responsibility*, New York: Orbis

²⁵ 'Vivid impulses, though not always easy to identify, came from a group of thinkers of diverse religious backgrounds which is frequently referred to as the "traditional school" or "perennial philosophy". It is characterized by a strictly metaphysical position, drawing on the major forms of mysticism in the various religions, and often combined with a fierce anti-modernism. Among the intellectual fathers of this line are René Guénon, Frithjof Schuon and Ananda Coomaraswamy. Marco Pallis, Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Huston Smith developed their ideas further from within the Buddhist, the Muslim and the Christian tradition respectively.' Leukel-Schmidt, Perry, 2008, 'Pluralisms: How to Appreciate Religious Diversity Theologically' in *Race/Hedges, Christian Approaches*, 90.

²⁶ This point is sometimes dismissed as pedantry by pluralists. For them, the crucial point is that 'pluralism' transcends Christian 'inclusivism' (or the inclusivism of any one tradition), by finding an orienting truth which is greater than the Christian tradition

4. Analogies from Judaism

I pause to stress that I do recognise how embedded my thought to this point has been in Christian terms and emphases. I do hear the objection that Judaism cannot engage with this in direct fashion. Bluntly, Judaism just does not think of people being 'saved', presumably being 'saved from damnation'.²⁷ Not only do Jews have no doctrine of damnation, but they positively affirm that non-Jews can and will be saved. I counter that it is important to recognise that not all Christian talk of 'salvation' or 'being saved' operates within an apocalyptic or dualistic frame. Rather, it can mean, and at its broadest does mean 'to gain whatever the benefits are of being in right relationship with God'. This certainly includes enjoying whatever the best thing is, after death (heaven, or the world to come). But it is not limited to that.²⁸

There still seems to be this obvious difference: Christians seem to claim you have to be a Christian to gain whatever the benefits are of being in right relationship with God; Jews expressly affirm that people other than Jews can gain whatever the benefits are of being in right relationship with God. This is true. But my contention is that there are other questions which might be asked. Among them might be:

- a) What must I do to be doing the things of God?
- b) How do I make as sure as I can be that I am avoiding idolatry?
- c) Given that I am a worshipping animal, how can I be most sure that I am worshipping the living God, the God who reveals?

(etc). So, potentially at least, it can find universal recognition. An inclusivist response is to apply a hermeneutics of suspicion to the idea of a neutral 'finding' of said orienting truth, and to the idea that this is 'greater than', rather than simply 'other than' the orientations found within the existing traditions. One does not have to hate the Enlightenment to see here an example of modernism's overconfidence in its own capacity neutrally to categorise and evaluate the particularities it finds, as if it alone were not particular. It is not necessarily the case that (say) 'the generic God of theism' can be received by real-life religious people as more encompassing than 'Christ'. It feels that way, though, to those who are already committed to a certain mapping of the religious terrain, in which there is theism, divided into monotheism and polytheism, in turn divided and subdivided into different religious species, each, tellingly, an 'ism'. Yet this mapping is local, particular, and limited.

²⁷ See Solomon, Norman, 1991, *Judaism and World Religions*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 217f, 222.

²⁸ The definitive creeds are famously vague not only about the content of salvation, but about precisely how Christ effects it. The Nicaeo-Constantopolitan creed simply names the link (*ton di'hemas tous anthropous kai dia ten hemeteran soterian kathelthonta ek ton ouranon – qui propter nos homines et propter nostrum salutem descendit de caelis* - for us human beings and for our salvation he came down from heaven), thus granting Christians room for different views, within orthodoxy.

- d) How do I respond as fully as a human being possibly can to the Revelation of God and the disclosure of God's will?
e) Where is God's own revelation?

God may be found through the beauty, order and awesomeness of creation. But if there is revelation of God's will beyond/within that, is that revelation only in Judaism? Or might it also be outside in other human celebrations of revelations, which might be considered something like equal or equivalent? This is, famously, a question which troubled Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks in *The Dignity of Difference*, one where he radically modifies a statement made in the first edition in the second:

[Original] In the course of history, God has spoken to mankind in many languages: through Judaism to Jews, Christianity to Christians, Islam to Muslims.

[Revised] As Jews we believe that God has made a covenant with a singular people, but that does not exclude the possibility of other peoples, cultures and faiths finding their own relationship with God within the shared frame of the Noahide law.²⁹

If the Chief Rabbi is right in his redaction (and clearly he thought that he could secure the confidence of his constituency only if he made this clarification), then, while indeed not all must become Jewish to have a place in the world to come, there is but one revelation of God's will, by which all are called to orient themselves, with one degree of directness or another. Sinai has no equal in the world of human religiosity.

There are other suggestions within Judaism that that all must recognise the God of Israel as such (God revealed at Sinai), and reject any God who is understood as not the God of Israel (not revealed at Sinai). One obvious place is the liturgy, and the concluding *Aleinu* prayer and the following paragraph. These are worth quoting in full. Here is one orthodox translation of one version:

It is our duty to praise the Master of all, to ascribe greatness to the Molder of primeval creation, for He has not made us like the nations of the lands, and has not emplaced us like the families of the earth; for He has not assigned our portion like theirs nor our lot like all their multitudes. (For they bow to vanity [*hevel*] and emptiness [*riq*] and pray to a god [*EI*] which helps not.) But we bend our knees, bow, and acknowledge our thanks before the King Who reigns over kings, the Holy One, Blessed is He. He stretches out heaven and establishes the earth's foundations, the

²⁹ Summary in Rucker, Simon, 2003, 'Vive la différence', *Jewish Chronicle*, 14.02.03. Cf. Sacks, Jonathan, 2002, *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilisations*, London: New York

seat of His homage is in the heavens above and His powerful Presence is in the loftiest heights. He is our God and there is none other. True is our King, there is nothing beside Him, as it is written in His Torah: 'You are to know this day and take to your heart that HASHEM is the only God – in heaven above and on the earth below – there is none other [Deuteronomy 4.39].

Therefore we put our hope in You, HASHEM our God, that we may soon see Your mighty splendor, to remove detestable idolatry from the earth, and false gods will be utterly cut off, to perfect the universe through the Almighty's sovereignty. Then all humanity will call upon Your Name, to turn all the earth's wicked toward You. All the world's inhabitants will recognize and know that to You every knee should bend, every tongue should swear. Before You HASHEM, our God, they will bend every knee and cast themselves down and to the glory of Your Name they will render homage, and they will all accept upon themselves the yoke of Your kingship [*ol malekhutekha*] that You may reign over them soon and eternally. For the kingdom is Yours and You will reign for all eternity in glory as it is written in Your Torah: HASHEM shall reign for all eternity [Exodus 15.18]. And it is said: HASHEM will be King over all the world – on that day HASHEM will be One and His Name will be One [Zechariah 14.9].³⁰

The Rambam (1135-1204) was also important in articulating Judaism as uniquely containing the truths which are for all humankind, seeing Christianity as *praeperatio messianica*, guides to gentiles which prepared them for the coming of the messianic age when the people of Israel will be vindicated. Indeed, at one point he writes: 'Moses our teacher was commanded by God to compel the commandments to the Noahides. All who do not accept are killed.'³¹ This is a difficult phrase to understand. Certainly, Maimonides was not telling his Jewish contemporaries to kill, even if one were to see that as capital punishment.³² The claim is further made that the Rambam at this point says that one is to command the children of Noah to believe in the seven commandments of the Noahide covenant *because they believe they were part of the Revelation at Sinai*.³³ These are

³⁰ Sherman, Nossou (ed.), 1987, *The Complete ArtScroll Siddur*, 2nd edition, New York: Mesorah, 158-161

³¹ *Yad Hil Melachim*, 8.10

³² For a discussion of options, see Reuven Silverman, 2011, 'Jewish Mission', in Silverman, Reuven, Morrow, Patrick, and Langton, Daniel, *Jews and Christians: Perspectives on Mission*, <http://www.woolf.cam.ac.uk/uploads/Woolf%20Mission%202011%20print%20version.pdf>, 3-21

³³ This is as suggested by Silverman, 8. However, it has since the conference been pointed out to me that the Frankel edition of Maimonides' *Yad Chazakah* suggests a different reading. Certainly, those who come to the Noahide commandments by reason (wisdom) are themselves honoured, as one would expect of the philosopher

suggestive remarks only. Here is not the place to assess the true emphases of the Rambam's thought. But they are offered as pointers to the fact that – for all he believed that the righteous of the nations have a place in the world to come – he was far from being what theologians now mean by a 'pluralist' before his time.

The same belief in the normativeness of Judaism at its most basic is found in the influential work of Franz Rosenzweig (1886-1929). This is the necessary implication of the nature of his famous imagery. To the Jews, the star itself; to the Christians, the rays emanating from this centre. For example:

Before God, then, the Jew and Christian both labor at the same task. He cannot dispense with either. He has set enmity between the two for all time, and withal has most intimately bound each to each. To us [Jews] he gave eternal life by kindling the fire of the Star of his truth in our hearts. They [the Christians] he set on the eternal way by causing them to pursue the rays of that Star of his truth for all time unto the eternal end.³⁴

To say again, this is not the place to augment and then synthesise these ideas to arrive at a definitive understanding of the Jewish approach to the other.³⁵ Perhaps enough has been offered to clarify that in important ways rabbinic Judaism understands its own teaching as normative, notwithstanding that only Jews need follow all the 613 commandments. At heart (*at its most basic*, when it addresses the fundamentals of God, revelation and human flourishing), Judaism expresses the truth for all. Thus, others, who are not Jews, who at their best have a share in the world to come, also have that share because at the most rudimentary level they are aligning themselves, consciously or unconsciously, with the God of Israel. I am even going to push a bit further into a place of controversy. It seems to me that, to the gentile who asks how they might worship God most fully, and live a life of constant and powerful intimacy with God, according to the patterns which God Himself describes and commends to those who wish to follow Him most closely, the simplest answer for the rabbinic Jew would

Maimonides. Whether this is a slight or a major difference, for our purposes, it is beyond my competence to say. Delightfully, though, the matter turns on one letter (whether a word begins with a *lamed* or an *aleph*).

³⁴ Rosenzweig, Franz, 1971, *The Star of Redemption*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 415.

³⁵ Naturally, among Jewish writers there are many who revise these rabbinic traditions and propose a 'pluralist' approach. An example is Cohn-Sherbok, Dan, 1994, *Judaism and Other Faiths*, Basingstoke: Macmillan. My point is that this is a revision, and the tradition does not suggest it follows automatically from the conviction that there can be righteous gentiles, worthy of the world to come.

logically have to give is: become Jewish.³⁶ This is not to say that the rabbis were all anonymous Rahnerians (if that isn't too confusing a way of putting it). It is to claim that there are analogies with Rahner's position which are clearly worth some careful teasing out.

5. Refinement

And now to change tack a little. Now to risk some modification or even criticism of Rahner. I am not the first person to wonder if Rahner, when offering reflections on anonymous Christians, sufficiently thought through the case that, from Catholic first-principles, Judaism is different from the non-Christian religions, is not in fact part of that set. He did engage with Judaism specifically, notably and movingly in dialogue with orthodox Jewish scholar, Pinchas Lapide.³⁷ In this text, he is insistent that any Christian approach to Judaism starts from a different place from that for any other faith. But the nature of the difference is not spelled out in any detail.

It is naturally clear that from a Christian and Catholic perspective the relationship of the Church to the Jews on the one hand and to non-Christians on the other should not be treated in one and the same document because these relationships are essentially different.³⁸

Yet this difference calls for a different mission to the Jews than to all others, rather than abstention from mission:

The relationship of the Church to Israel may be essentially different from the relationship of the Church to the Gentile people, but I cannot therefore simply interpret the Christian mission to the Jews as superfluous. This is because it must, in its essence, be different from the mission to the Gentiles and because we do not know the day of unity between Israel and the Gentile Church. We also certainly don't know the day on which Japan as a people will actually enter the Church, and so the Church still works for the conversion of the Japanese.³⁹

³⁶ This is not to dismiss the traditions which call for Jews to rebuff the prospective convert, maybe as many as three times. But it is to place such notions in a different context. See Silverman, *op cit*.

³⁷ Lapide, Pinchas and Rahner, Karl, 1983, *Heil von den Juden? Ein Gespräch*, Mainz: Matthias-Grünewald; English translation: idem, 1987, *Encountering Jesus – Encountering Judaism: A Dialogue*, New York: Crossroad

³⁸ Lapide/Rahner [ET], 4; the reference is to *Nostra Aetate* and the process of its coming into being. The next sentence is: 'But precisely on ecclesiastical and sociopolitical grounds, following a major controversy, it could not be otherwise.'

³⁹ *Ibid*, 6. Cf. 80: 'you may not in principle deny me my right to my hope that you as a Jew will recognize one day (when, naturally, I don't know) that Jesus, your brother 'according to the flesh,' is the unsurpassable and irrevocable promise, or the one

Indeed, it might be said that times the uniqueness of Judaism is lost from view or treated as irrelevant. So, for example, he is able to say that a Jew might find God solely through the exercise of his conscience, which of course, at last since the Council, applies to every human being:

Whether one is true in his conscience before God or not is something that no one can know with reflexive certainty. But when and where a person actually follows his conscience, then and there he is certainly at peace with God. If you therefore say: as a Jew I have a humble question mark about Jesus and we both hope together for an ultimate redemption, then based on my normal Catholic faith and the Second Vatican Council, I have no reason to doubt that in spite of the differences in our relationship to Jesus we meet in a radical decision for the good and so reach the one and the same God.⁴⁰

Elsewhere, Rahner describes Islam as, along with Judaism, so close to Christianity as not properly to belong to the set of 'non-Christian' religions. The point is not at all developed, but that the claim is made, even *en passant*, has import:

in this question (as distinct from *Nostra aetate* of the Second Vatican Council), the term 'non-Christian religions' must be understood as excluding the Jewish religion and Islam, since the Old Testament contains part of that divine revelation which Christianity regards as its own and Islam is related expressly at least to Christian revelation as a whole.⁴¹

whose glorification by God is for the sake of the promises that God himself gave Israel and finally also us Gentiles.'

⁴⁰ Rahner/Lapide, 80. That a Jew may find salvation by true (hidden) exercise of their conscience is unobjectionable in itself. This is so not least because there are secular or atheist Jews who eschew the whole Biblical tradition. There have been Jews who have otherwise moved away from the Biblical heritage we share, such as followers of Shabbetai Zvi. These persons are not known to be damned; they might be saved by following their consciences even if they are in error, like anybody else. But this statement comes in a chapter entitled 'The Common Hope', and I suggest that for Christians the hope with and for Jews goes so far beyond the idea that they might exercise their consciences properly that this statement misleads. In attending to the Biblical tradition, Jews are – so Christians within this frame believe – attending to God. Indeed, since Christ is – again, according to this frame – hidden in the Hebrew Scriptures (*Dei Verbum* 16), they are already attending to Christ and in that one - far-from-negligible - sense, saying a Yes to Christ. (This statement is made not in ignorance of the difficulties of interpreting 2 Cor 3.14-16, but in the insistence that Paul's brief image there need not be determinative.)

⁴¹ Rahner, Karl, 1984, 'On the Importance of the Non-Christian Religions for Salvation', 288. This may be a late insight for Rahner, or he may be simply inconsistent. Cf. 'the non-Christian religions and philosophies of life such as Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism...', in idem, 1973, 'Church, Churches and Religion' in *Theological Investigations*, volume 10, London: DLT, 30.

In this vagueness, he can be said to differ from the contemporary Roman Catholic magisterium.⁴² Contemporary Roman Catholicism seems to me to be as clear as it can be that Judaism is not one of the set of non-Christian religions. It is a cumulative case. The Pontifical Council for Religious Relations with Jews comes within the Council for Christian Unity. Within the liturgy there is no prayer that calls explicitly for Jewish conversion to Christianity (the new so-called 'Tridentine' Good Friday prayer stretches, but does not destroy this point)⁴³ There is no missionary organisation dedicated to seeking Jewish conversion. But I have also long been struck by the Pontifical Biblical Commission's document, which includes this statement:

The Jewish reading of the Bible is a possible one, in continuity with the Jewish Scriptures of the Second Temple period, a reading analogous to the Christian reading, which developed in parallel fashion.⁴⁴

⁴² If this is a criticism, it is tempered by an awareness that the magisterium's position has grown gradually out of the Second Vatican Council, with a special role played by Pope John Paul II. Nevertheless, it can be recorded that the *sui generis* nature of Judaism for Catholics was coming into view already in *Guidelines on Religious Relations with the Jews*, 1974, cf. 'The problem of Jewish-Christian relations concerns the Church as such, since it is when "pondering her own mystery" that she encounters the mystery of Israel. Therefore, even in areas where no Jewish communities exist, this remains an important problem. There is also an ecumenical aspect to the question: the very return of Christians to the sources and origins of their faith, grafted on to the earlier Covenant, helps the search for unity in Christ, the cornerstone' (Flannery, *op cit*, 748).

⁴³ The 2008 prayer according to the Extraordinary Rite reads: 'Let us also pray for the Jews: That our God and Lord may illuminate their hearts, that they acknowledge Jesus Christ is the Saviour of all men. (Let us pray. Kneel. Rise.) Almighty and eternal God, who want that all men be saved and come to the recognition of the truth, propitiously grant that even as the fullness of the peoples enters Thy Church, all Israel be saved. Through Christ Our Lord. Amen.' By placing the emphasis on 'even as the fullness of the peoples enters Thy Church' it is possible to understand this prayer as strictly eschatological in its hope, which does not call for proselytising missionary activity before the eschaton. Moreover, the Ordinary Rite prayer is overwhelmingly the normal prayer. It reads (1973): 'Let us pray for the Jewish people, the first to hear the word of God, that they may continue to grow in the love of his name and in faithfulness to his covenant. (*Prayer in silence. Then the priest says:*) Almighty and eternal God, long ago you gave your promise to Abraham and his posterity. Listen to your Church as we pray that the people you first made your own may arrive at the fullness of redemption. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.'

⁴⁴ *The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures* § 22. This sentence is quoted in the affirming Preface, written by the then-Cardinal Ratzinger. In what follows, it is true that I am placing great weight on the word 'possible'. I see that this must be a theological judgement. As a merely historical judgement, it is tautological and redundant (whereas the adjectives 'analogous' and 'parallel', without the prior 'possible', would be capable of being understood purely historically). As a confirmation of this, it is worth noting that after the then-Cardinal Ratzinger gives this citation, he adds: 'It [the document] adds that Christians can learn a great deal from a Jewish exegesis practised for more than 2000 years.' Something he, as pope, has gone on to state in other contexts. Thus my (perhaps) cumulative argument: the Church is owning that

The magisterium can be said to be never more neuralgic than when it encounters a claim that anything might be parallel to or analogous to the true Church. So this simple sentence constitutes a *novum*. Since the document is anything but historically naïve, the Judaism here so demonstrably affirmed must be rabbinic Judaism, that of Mishnah, Talmud and midrash. This means here the Roman Catholic Church is recognising that a post-biblical religion is in some senses parallel to the Church, and that, not because it is similar to the Church in structures or teaching (it isn't), but out of its own authenticity, its own – one almost *has to say* – charism.

I argue that Rahner's failure to consider this *sui generis* status of Judaism is a serious weakness in his thinking. If Rahner were clearer that the uniqueness of Judaism is not of historical import alone, but is rather a *theological* judgement, then it would follow that, within this Catholic Christian frame, there are, at least in some respects, two Israels (the Church, and the Jewish People), or Israel bifurcates, is divided in two.

If this is allowed, then something else must follow. Then the conservative ecclesiological frame with which Rahner begins his formative lecture is itself deconstructed - and that by the logic of the Catholic magisterium itself! The Church is not as unqualifiedly absolute in the way he suggests. We have found an important qualification.⁴⁵ The argument is not that the Church understands Judaism as in every way its equal or equivalent. It does not. But it is recognising that a sibling (not parent) religion has its own authentic relationship with God, Holy Trinity

Does it still make sense to speak of Jews (in particular) as 'anonymous Christians'? We have to say: Yes. Jews, inasmuch as they respond to grace, are in Christ. The idea that Jews might be in saving relationship with the Father and the Spirit, but not with the Son, destroys the whole structure of Trinitarian thinking, and that's a price too high for Catholicism to pay.⁴⁶ But! But that is no longer sufficient. It might – I

rabbinic religion has its own authenticity, which the Church can celebrate as such, but never quite delimit (for by what criteria would it know when rabbinic religion is being true to *itself*?).

⁴⁵ Strictly speaking, the letter of the first thesis of Rahner's 1961 lecture can still stand. But its spirit is undermined. The absoluteness of the church is relativised in one sense, and once that has happened, one is better off avoiding the language of absoluteness.

⁴⁶ The principle is that the Persons of Trinity cannot be defined by separate roles. That opens the door to modalism (God is one as a Unitarian sees it, but wears three different hats when engaging us) or tritheism (God is a team of three). Both of these would allow 'the Son' to be absent from God's encounter with Judaism. But both of these are heretical in the eyes of orthodox Christianity. The Trinitarian dialectic is preserved only if it is understood that the Persons are alike in all things save their mutual relations. I am reminded of a conversation where a rabbi responded to my

should say it *must* - be as true to think of Christians as 'anonymous Israelites' or 'anonymous Jews' or 'anonymous *chasidim*'.⁴⁷ Christians are in relationship with God of Israel, God of the Israel which is not the Church.⁴⁸ And the One with whom all Christians are in a saving relationship is now understood not only as God of the story of the Hebrew Bible, but every bit as much as God of the rabbinic genius, of Mishnah, Talmud, midrash, and of the ever-expanding love of the ever-unfolding, self-renewing Torah.

Some will undoubtedly immediately want to ask: if that is allowed with regard to Judaism, are there any possible analogies with regard to other faiths? Here surely we have reached the question I should be a fool even to think of answering here. So I throw it into the room with abandon.⁴⁹

making such a case by saying: 'But I don't want to be in Christ'. Not at the time, but later I gave what I hold to be the best response: 'I am sorry, but it is out of my hands'. This understanding of the Trinity is part of the basic grammar of the Christian language.

⁴⁷ It will take some time to arrive at the best terminology. To describe Christians as 'anonymous Jews' or 'anonymous Israelites' might be understood as saying that Christianity grew out of the Israelite religion of the Hebrew Scriptures, or the Jewish religion of the New Testament, without – also – implying that God is blessing this *sibling* faith through rabbinic ways. For Christians, there is no God who does not bless the people of Israel, in ways the Church cannot always have the measure of. 'Anonymous rabbinists' might be logically the best phrase. Unfortunately, 'rabbinic religion' has been used as a derogatory term by Christians, seeking to disassociate rabbinic Judaism from Biblical Judaisms, and it is not clear to me that it can be rehabilitated. Hence my – heuristic – suggestion of 'anonymous *chasidim*', principally to use a term not immediately associated with Christian Scripture. It is not entirely random; it has of course been suggested that Jesus was himself a *chasid* of his day. The weakness is that chasidism is associated with kabbalah, which as such plays no part in the case we are making.

⁴⁸ The absence of definite article before 'God' is deliberate, even if it makes for a certain awkwardness. Adding the definite article to the word God always risks giving the feel that one is operating, at one level or another, within a polytheistic frame, as if 'the God of Israel' is in relationship with 'the God of Jesus Christ' (and, perhaps, others too).

⁴⁹ Away from the room, I will say that the answer will ultimately lie between the two unacceptable poles. At one pole, it is argued that there is no relevance whatsoever. But that ignores the fact that (if I am right) the Church has committed itself to affirming an extra-biblical religion, rabbinic Judaism, on grounds other than its being phenomenologically similar to the Church (it isn't). So the door to *some kind of* affirmation of other religions cannot be said to be locked. At the other pole is the argument that exactly the same claim can, in due course, be made of other religions, most obviously Islam. That is to deny the *sui generis* nature of Judaism, which alone made this affirmation possible in the first place.

Conclusion

My thesis has been that it is easy and natural to dismiss inclusivism as arrogant theological colonialism. Karl Rahner's very language of non-Christians as 'anonymous Christians' betrays the problem.⁵⁰ Yet I hold that his theory provides an unanswerable case for the conservative ecclesiocentric. He spells out how they may meet the non-Christian as *already graced*, and perhaps with the very wisdom they most need to hear.

Further, the logic of the argument is sound. The truth which orients me is 'exclusive', in the sense that if you expressly deny it, you are, I must believe, speaking falsely.⁵¹ But I do not have to believe that is necessary explicitly to articulate the truth which orients me, in order to get its benefits. So it is 'inclusive' with regard to 'salvation' (if I want to call the benefit that). This same logic is often hidden within so-called pluralism. And a looser, non-systematic version of it can be found within Judaism. It is found when one thinks of the dynamics of Revelation, rather than simply the putative criteria for entry into the world to come.

What is needed is a detailed critique of Rahner's position, rather than in-principle rejection. That detailed critique might move most speedily if it asks why Rahner paid some - but radically insufficient - attention to the *sui generis* nature of Judaism, which here must mean rabbinic Judaism, Judaism as we know it. This recognition opens up many creative questions, and challenges conservative ecclesiocentrism anew. On the other hand, if we hasten to insist that Judaism and Christianity (and maybe others) are simply 'parallel' faiths, most of this creativity does not come into view.

⁵⁰ Rahner himself knew that many of his critics objected principally to his terminology. His defence was unapologetic: given the content of the claims he was making, the terminology is fit for purpose. Critics must supply an alternative and explain why it is preferable. Cf Rahner, Karl, , 'Observations on the Problems of the "Anonymous Christian"', in *Theological Investigations*, volume 14, 280-294. Rahner does acknowledge that it might be better to ignore the term 'anonymous Christianity' as multivalent and open to misunderstanding. I understand him to mean that it is not the case, within his frame, that we think of Islam as 'the Muslim Church' etc etc. Ibid, 281.

⁵¹ Of course, not all statements that look like a denial of my truth-claim are such. In any real dialogue, there is a painstaking task to be done, to work out what each party really means, and whether terminology apparently held in common amounts to 'false friends'. And, when the terminology is totally alien, one may be agnostic about the compatibility of statements. But ultimately this means no more than that people may agree more than they seem to agree. It does not alter the logic that a truth claim *excludes* its real refutation.

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