
Christ the Notification?

Critiques and Categorizations of Rahner's Soteriology

Karl Rahner's status as one of the most influential theologians of the twentieth century is uncontested. However, valuations of that impact differ significantly. While many have celebrated his influence on Catholic theology, others have viewed his theology with deep suspicion. The time surrounding the Second Vatican Council exemplifies this phenomenon. In the years leading up to this event, Rahner had garnered enough detractors among the Roman Curia to have him entirely excluded from council preparations.¹ Once he was included, which occurred only after Pope John XXIII's personal intervention at Cardinal Julius Döpfner's behest, his activities quickly led to the appointment of a Roman censor for all of his writings.² While Cardinal Alfredo Ottaviani (the head of the Holy Office) eventually remitted the censor and even gained a deep respect for Rahner over the course of the council, some of his detractors remained steadfastly opposed to his thinking. During the council, a group of "French integralists" published

1. Herbert Vorgrimler, "Karl Rahner: The Theologian's Contribution," in *Vatican II Revisited: By Those Who Were There*, ed. Alberic Stacpoole (Minneapolis: Winston, 1986), 32–46, at 38.

2. Günther Wassilowsky, *Universales Heilssakrament Kirche: Karl Rahners Beitrag zur Ekklesiologie des II. Vatikanums* (Innsbruck: Tyrolia, 2001), 93.

a pamphlet identifying Rahner and Joseph Ratzinger as “heretics who . . . are worse than Teilhard and the modernists.”³ However, his theological contributions were embraced by enough council fathers to find expression in a multitude of the council’s documents, including *Lumen gentium*, *Dei Verbum*, and *Gaudium et Spes*.

In the years following Vatican II, Rahner’s detractors continued to criticize his thought sharply. The most well-known of such criticism, perhaps, came not from the Curia or reactionary traditionalists, but was leveled by the Swiss Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar. Among Balthasar’s major concerns were that Rahner jeopardized the demands and truth claims of Christian revelation in an attempt to “accommodate” the contemporary world⁴ and that his theory of the “anonymous Christian” was an oxymoron which (among other things) eviscerated evangelism and missionary activity.⁵ But along with these worries, Balthasar voiced a concern that for Rahner, Jesus Christ does not actually “do” anything to accomplish our salvation.

This latter concern about Karl Rahner’s soteriology is central to the subject of this book. The question of how (and even *whether*) Rahner understands Christ to *effect* human salvation serves as a point of departure for this study of his Christology and soteriology, a study which takes this accusation seriously and attempts to interpret Rahner in such a way as (i) to allay the concerns (namely, insistence upon an authentic and robust christocentricity and on the indispensable place of the Paschal Mystery as the nexus point of salvation history) of those who level it, and (ii) to complexify and supplement the extant apologies for Rahner by suggesting a new approach. Let us turn to these assessments, beginning with those shaped by Balthasar’s critique and subsequently considering the apologies and other sympathetic treatments. The outlines of my own interpretation will conclude the chapter and be filled in by those which follow.

3. Karl Rahner, “Es ist merkwürdig bei einem Konzil,” *Stimmen Der Zeit* 9/2012, 590–96, at 591. English quotations from non-English sources are, unless otherwise noted, my own translations.

4. Cf. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Moment of Christian Witness* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994).

5. Cf. Aidan Nichols, “Rahner and Balthasar: The Anonymous Christianity Debate Revisited,” in *Beyond the Blue Glass: Catholic Essays on Faith and Culture* (London: Saint Austin Press, 2002). Note also Rahner’s response in “Anonymous Christianity and the Missionary Task of the Church,” in *TI* 12:161–78, particularly his observation that Cornelius was baptized *because* he possessed the Holy Spirit (*ibid.*, 171, Acts 10:47).

The Instigating Question: Balthasar

In the fourth volume of his *Theo-Drama* series, Balthasar devotes about 80 pages to a historical outline of Christian soteriology before elaborating his own “dramatic” soteriology.⁶ Within this historical outline, he identifies two contemporary soteriological approaches, which he classifies in terms of “solidarity” (e.g., J. Alfaro, H. Küng, E. Schillebeeckx, Rahner) and “substitution” (e.g., K. Barth, W. Pannenberg, J. Moltmann, but also Catholics such as R. Garrigou-Lagrange, M. Blondel, J. Daniélou). Balthasar’s own stated course of action is to synthesize these two insights, so that Christ’s solidarity *with* sinful humanity extends to a point of taking our sinfulness upon himself, and thus undergoing unique and unprecedented alienation from God; in the words of Jean Galot (of which Balthasar approves), “There is solidarity, it is true, but it extends as far as substitution [*bis zur Substitution*]: Christ’s solidarity with us goes as far as taking our place [*unsere Stelle einnehmend*] and allowing the whole weight of human guilt to fall upon him.”⁷ That is, “the idea of solidarity is insufficient, without that of representative (‘vicarious’) suffering.”⁸

Balthasar insists that any account of “solidarity” ought to (i) encompass human sinfulness (for “the incarnate Son of God’s solidarity [is] with *sinful* humanity”),⁹ and (ii) “extend” into a unique, unsurpassable, vicarious suffering on the part of Jesus as a result of this sinfulness. However, Balthasar laments, solidarity “easily slides unnoticed into misuse at the hands of a liberal Christology that puts the emphasis on Jesus’ solidarity—expressed in his life and teaching—with the poor, sinners and the marginalized and sees the Cross as nothing more than the ultimate consequence of this ‘social’ solidarity.”¹⁰ In this view, “Jesus became the Redeemer, not by his death on the Cross, but by his moral example and his teaching.”¹¹ Balthasar explains that this understanding of solidarity tries to draw on the patristic understanding of the “exchange” between God and humanity which occurred in Jesus, but asserts that this “*commercium* no longer operates at the ontological

6. *Theo-Drama* (henceforth *TD*) 5 vols. (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1988–1998), 4:231–316. This section occurs within the third volume in the German original *Theodramatik* 4 vols. (Einsiedeln: Johannes, 1973–1983).

7. *TD* 4:297. The entire phrase “representative (‘vicarious’) suffering” is Graham Harrison’s translation of *Stellvertretung*.

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*, 268.

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Ibid.*, 268–69.

plane but only on the social and psychological level.”¹² At this point, Balthasar concludes his treatment of contemporary solidarity soteriologies with an “excursus” on Karl Rahner.¹³

From the outset, Balthasar portrays Rahner’s soteriology as inimical to theories of “representation.” “In Scripture, in the Fathers, and in Anselm, the *pro nobis*, preeminently in the Cross of Christ, is interpreted as a representative expiation [*stellvertretende Sühne*]. Rahner rejects this interpretation.”¹⁴ As evidence, he cites an instance where Rahner critiques the idea of Jesus taking our place in such a way that “self-redemption” is undercut.¹⁵ Moreover, Balthasar makes note of Rahner’s refrain that “God, who is unchangeable, cannot be caused to ‘change his mind’ by an event in the world like the Cross of Christ; he cannot be changed from an insulted, wrathful God to a reconciled God.”¹⁶ In rejecting this extreme view, which—Balthasar (rightly) notes—neither Anselm nor Scripture hold, Rahner is alleged to have thrown out the baby (“representation”) with the bathwater (theories of atonement based on changing *God*, rather than *us*), as it were.

Balthasar goes on to say Rahner styles this immutable, saving God as “he-who-is-always-reconciled [*der je-schon-Versöhnte*],”¹⁷ a vision of

12. *Ibid.*, 273. Recently, and citing Balthasar, Walter Kasper has made the same point about Catholic proponents of “soft” atonement theories of solidarity collapsing the “metaphysical” in to the “social” in his *Mercy: The Essence of the Gospel and the Key to Christian Life* (New York: Paulist, 2014), 74.
13. For purposes of reference to the original German text, this section can be found in *Theodramatik* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1980), 3:253–62.
14. TD 4:274.
15. Namely, from “The One Christ and the Universality of Salvation” (1975) *TI* 16:199–2224, at 208. As Balthasar cites it, “This theory ‘requires man’s place to be taken by Jesus *in a way that is ultimately beyond our powers to conceive*; it contradicts a proper understanding of man’s self-redemption” (TD 4:274, emphasis original. Note: G. Harrison’s English translation here differs from the one in *TI*, cited later in this chapter in the subsection, “Inconceivable” Representative Action? Rahner and *Stellvertretung*). It should be noted that in this passage, Rahner sets Anselmian “satisfaction theory,” rather than any account of “representation” (as Balthasar would seem to have it), in opposition to “self-redemption.” Rahner explains the term self-redemption in the same article: “If, however, self-redemption means that a man can achieve his fulfilment without God, then any form of self-redemption is foreign to Christian teaching. Christian salvation can only be understood as self-redemption in the sense that a man does not merely receive his salvation in a passive manner but rather realises it with total, and not just partial, freedom. The very possibility of freedom, however, is established by God through nature and grace. To gain a proper idea of this grace one should not conceive of the grace in which a man achieves salvation as an external means but rather as the innermost core of human freedom which is freely constituted by God” (*TI* 16:206–207). Rahner returns to the term in “The Christian Understanding of Redemption” (1981), where he writes, “it is simply wrong to maintain that self-redemption and redemption from outside are . . . mutually exclusive” (*TI* 21:239–54, at 241).
16. TD 4:275. As Balthasar notes, Rahner on several occasions (unfairly) attributes such a view to Anselm.
17. Such a description of God is embraced by Hegel in his account of the Christ-event, in which “God has shown himself to be by his very nature reconciled with the world” (*Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, 3 vols. (New York: Humanities Press, 1962), 3:99). But cf. Rahner’s claim in “Reconciliation

God which renders the “the Incarnation and death of Jesus Christ . . . only . . . a final cause or . . . a ‘quasi-sacramental’ cause.”¹⁸ According to Balthasar, such causality means that “it is not Christ who, in virtue of his uniqueness, embraces and contains mankind [*die Menschheit in sich einfaßt*] in order to reconcile it to God through his suffering—for we have already heard that such ‘representative’ action [*Stellvertretung*] is inconceivable.”¹⁹ While he does not go so far to say that Christ’s soteriological significance is, for Rahner, simply that of a moral exemplar, Balthasar repeats that for him, “Jesus could not represent [*stellvertreten*] men in any other way but that in which one man is able to ‘be there’ for another”; Jesus is one graced man who exists in a weak “solidarity” with others who are not “essentially different” from himself.²⁰ Rahner’s preference for a robust account of personal freedom (interpreted as “self-activation of the subject in its totality”) weakens his account of “solidarity,” and so, “it remains unclear in what sense—if Christ is to be more than an example—Rahner wishes to speak of ‘sharing’ [*«Teilnahme»*] in the death of Christ.”²¹ Balthasar admits that Rahner “[o]ccasionally . . . does speak of a participation [*Teilnahme*] in the death of Jesus,” but confusingly “veto[es] against Jesus genuinely ‘representing’ [*echte Stellvertretung*] sinners.”²² Alternatively, Balthasar suggests that Jesus “on our behalf (that is, as our representative), should endure the alienating alienation . . . liberating man from alienation.” Such a “genuine ‘representation’ [*Stellvertretung*] (that is, on behalf of, and in the place of, the sinner)” would, in fact, *enable* rather than *detract from* our own self-actualization.²³

Balthasar concludes his soteriological concerns by turning to Rahner’s more specifically christological writings. It seems, he says, that for Rahner, Jesus’s “(hypostatic) unity is only the highest instance . . . of the unity that comes about in the coincidence of the human transcendence toward the divine horizon and God’s self-disclosure.”²⁴ That

and Vicarious Representation” (1982) that “God has reconciled the world to himself in Jesus the crucified” (*TI* 21:255–69, at 261).

18. *TD* 4:276.

19. *Ibid.*

20. *Ibid.*

21. *Ibid.*, 278–79.

22. *Ibid.*, 280.

23. *Ibid.*, 281.

24. *Ibid.* Similarly, as Balthasar discusses the incarnate Son as uniquely capable of bearing the world’s sins, he remarks that Jesus’s “Godmanhood . . . is more than the ‘highest case’ of a transcendental anthropology” (*Mysterium Paschale: The Mystery of Easter* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000), 138). Shortly thereafter, Balthasar elaborates his critique in a footnote, diagnosing Rahner’s theology as suffering from a “minimalist interpretation” of texts like 2 Cor 5:21 and Gal 3:13, which Balthasar uses extensively in support of his own substitutionary atonement schema (147).

is, “the ‘Hypostatic Union’ . . . appears to be only the ‘most successful instance’” of concrete human nature, to which God is communicating himself.

Balthasar’s criticism of Karl Rahner can be summarized as follows: determined to provide a robust account of human freedom, Rahner has constructed an anthropology according to which an immutable God is consistently self-communicating in grace to members of the human race as they, in turn, self-realize by accepting this grace. Within the scheme, Jesus’s role amounts merely to existing as the most successful case of this dynamic of self-communication and realization. While Rahner infrequently gives superficial lip-service to notions of our “participating” in Christ, he eschews any suggestion of Christ as our “representative” from his system, under the historically naïve pretense of guarding against atonement theories which seek to change God rather than us. The result is a rather weak soteriology: “Christ’s Passion,” Balthasar remarks with Rahner clearly in mind, “is more than a sacramental sign that God is reconciled to the world and is applying the fruits of this reconciliation to the world.”²⁵ In other words, Rahner’s Christ does not so much *do* anything to effect our salvation as he does simply exist as a kind of notification to the world of what God is always and consistently doing anyway.

Balthasarian Critiques

This multifaceted critique raised by Balthasar proved to be quite influential after its publication. Not only was Rahner himself keenly aware of it, as we will see in chapter 5, but Balthasar’s criticism exerted its influence on other evaluations of Rahner’s Christology and soteriology. Here, let us briefly consider two critical readers of Rahner whose interpretation of his soteriology overlap extensively with that of Balthasar, turning subsequently to other evaluations that draw on certain of Balthasar’s suggestions.

Guy Mansini

The first half of Guy Mansini’s *The Word Has Dwelt Among Us* is devoted explicitly to christological considerations.²⁶ A large swath of this first

25. *Ibid.*, 265. Balthasar’s critique of Rahner continues after his explicit “excursus,” remarking that “we should not say that the Cross is nothing other than the (‘quasi-sacramental’) manifestation of God’s reconciliation with the world, a reconciliation that is constant, homogeneous and always part of a given” (362).

half deals with the theologies of Rahner and Balthasar, setting the two in contrast to one another in various places. The book's seventh chapter, "Rahner and Balthasar on the Efficacy of the Cross," contrasts the two on the issue of soteriology. At the outset of this chapter, Mansini summarizes Rahner's soteriological *desiderata* as follows: "the Cross is the cause of salvation only in a quite restrained sense, after the manner of a sacrament"; soteriology must "avoid . . . the 'inconceivable notion' that Christ is our representative on the Cross or does anything in our stead," but must instead stand as "an account in which 'self-redemption' has a prominent place"; the "anger of God . . . becomes a minor or even non-existent theme"; and finally, soteriology cannot undermine God's immutability.²⁷

Mansini then proceeds to give a more detailed reading of Rahner's later, explicitly soteriological works, relying on Anselm Grün's work as a guide.²⁸ The way in which Rahner proposes to best realize the above *desiderata*, Mansini suggests, is to propose that Christ's cross effects salvation according to the mode of a sacrament. In doing so, Rahner "equates saying that the death of Jesus 'causes' salvation with saying that it has a 'meaning' for us," for "the Cross is supposed to *cause* simply because it *signifies*."²⁹ Pointing out that such a proposal may seem to "do nothing more than reduce the Cross to an event of revelation, a sort of demonstration of God's love," Mansini observes that Rahner "tries" to underline the robust *sacramental* character of signifying in this case.³⁰ Even so, Mansini's language of "tries" as well as "supposed to *cause*" anticipates his own evaluation of Rahner's level of success in styling Christ as an "effective exemplar (*produktive Vorbild*)."³¹

Mansini's explicit evaluation occurs after a lengthy treatment of Balthasar's own soteriology. In that evaluation, Mansini cites Balthasar's own "excursus" on Rahner's soteriology, noting that it can "be argued that Rahner does not do justice to the New Testament foundations of the notion of representation," a notion which Mansini says Rahner "jettison[s]."³² Mansini suggests that Rahner's insistence on avoiding this term is *not*, in fact, to protect human freedom, as Rahner

26. Guy Mansini, *The Word has Dwelt Among Us: Explorations in Theology* (Ave Maria, FL: Sapientia Press, 2008).

27. *Ibid.*, 94.

28. Anselm Grün, *Erlösung durch das Kreuz. Karl Rahners Beitrag zu einem heutigen Erlösungsverstandnis* (Münster-schwarzach: Vier-türme Verlag, 1975).

29. Mansini, *The Word has Dwelt Among Us*, 98.

30. *Ibid.*

31. *Ibid.*, 98–99.

32. *Ibid.*, 109.

himself claims (and which Mansini suspects to be a false pretense), but rather, is due to Rahner's insistence on protecting divine immutability, combined with Rahner's inability to realize that the cross can change things other than God (namely, "it can work an economic change").³³ Mansini concludes that the cross "is not merely the manifestation of the antecedent salvific will of God (Rahner), but is also a change – but only in the economy."³⁴

To be clear, Mansini does not adopt Balthasar's own soteriological system (indeed, he is quite critical of it), but his critique of Rahner leans significantly on Balthasar's "excursus." Mansini judges Rahner's soteriology to acknowledge the cross's salvific efficacy in only a "restrained" sense, that the Paschal Mystery becomes, for Rahner, simply a "sort of demonstration of God's love," and that Rahner "jettisons" any notion of Christ "representing" humanity.

George Vass

George Vass, who inherited Rahner's own chair at the University of Innsbruck, devotes the fourth volume of his series on "Understanding Karl Rahner" to the topic of "The Atonement and Mankind's Salvation."³⁵ Although much of this volume is dominated by consideration of the "anonymous Christian," it includes a more general evaluation of Rahner's overall soteriology as well. Vass makes it clear from the beginning that he feels an "uneasiness" with Rahner's account of human salvation, quickly going on to boldly assert that "Rahner has, properly speaking, no theory of redemption" at all.³⁶ Vass explains,

What has made me uneasy throughout in presenting Rahner's soteriology is the fact that he seems to explain away this dramatic character of man's redemption by either reducing it to the historical process of man's 'engracement' by Christ, or attributing it to God, whose love is unalterable in his salvific purpose. Of course, these are mediated through Jesus Christ, but mediation in itself means an a-personal function which does not allow

33. *Ibid.* Interestingly, Mansini is even more critical of Balthasar, deeming that much of Balthasar's constructive soteriology "must be abandoned," due to his confusion over Christ's natures leading him to improperly "import" things into the immanent Trinity (111-12). Mansini's ultimate conclusion is that both giants of the twentieth century are inadequate, and the best soteriological move is to retreat to medieval scholastic theology: "where we are left after we use Rahner to criticize Balthasar, and Balthasar to criticize Rahner, is with the prior tradition, the tradition of St. Anselm and St. Thomas on 'satisfaction'" (113).

34. *Ibid.*, 112.

35. George Vass, *A Pattern of Doctrines 2: The Atonement and Mankind's Salvation*, vol. 4 of *Understanding Karl Rahner*, 5 vols. (London: Sheed & Ward, 1998).

36. *Ibid.*, 16.

the contours of the personal Mediator to appear, the Christ who, because through his deed mankind's fate was basically altered, apparently changes the attitude of God to mankind.³⁷

Vass is much more at home with more act-centered, *dramatic* soteriological theories in which the interplay between God, Jesus, and the rest of humanity moves into an open future in which all parties are, in some way or another, changed. By shunning words such as “propitiation” and “ransom,” Rahner renders his view a sterile, playing-out of a preordained process, which Vass, at several points, even compares to Hegel's system.³⁸ As this process goes through the motions, Christ's mediation is simply the result of God's will, the eventual realization of which was really just a matter of course.³⁹ Moreover, any genuine theory of redemption must have a strong *pro nobis* dimension, with Christ performing “a free deed . . . *on our behalf*. The Mediator was destined by God to do freely something which man was unable to do.”⁴⁰

Vass's lament over the lack of an authentic, representative-Mediator is only one of several ways in which his critique of Rahner echoes Balthasar's excursus. Explicitly citing Balthasar, Vass wonders whether, in Rahner's system, there exists “a difference between man and the Incarnate beyond that of degree?”—for it seems to Vass that Christ is, for Rahner, merely a prime instance of successful humanity, and as Balthasar suggests, even Mary could fulfill this function in the same way.⁴¹ In the end, Rahner's soteriology boils down to Christ notifying the world of a salvation which is already occurring: “man's *soteria* through the mediation of Christ's cross is but the manifestation of God's ever permanent loving concern to save mankind.”⁴²

Vass's assumption that the two ideas of: (i) a representative-Mediator, and (ii) the performance of a discrete, salvific *task* are inextricably

37. *Ibid.*, 17.

38. *Ibid.*, 18, 21.

39. “A justifiable suspicion may arise that in Rahner's thought mediation can be reduced to a pre-established, if not necessary, fulfillment of God's self-bestowal on mankind” (*ibid.*, 17).

40. “Rahner seems painstakingly to avoid words connected with or expressing this drama: ‘expiation’, ‘propitiation’, ‘sacrifice’, ‘ransom’, and their like. . . . Yet, these words seem to have been part and parcel of the traditional faith: Christ's mediation was always thought to be a free deed of an incarnate person – *on our behalf*. The Mediator was destined by God to do freely something which man was unable to do” (*ibid.*, 18).

41. *Ibid.*, 19. Cf. Balthasar's remark in his excursus on Rahner's soteriology, “Furthermore, we would have to ask why the death of Mary (and her life, which was a preparation for it) did not lead to the same hypostatic union. Was she not free, according to Catholic teaching, from all inherited and personal guilt? And, as such, since she was perfect, was her death not of the same quality as that of Jesus?” (*TD* 4:280).

42. Vass, *A Pattern of Doctrines* 2, 21.

bound to one another is an assumption which should be kept in mind as the book unfolds. Indeed, I would suggest that Vass's assumption that Christ's "representation" is bound together with a singular vicarious act is also operative in Balthasar's own similar critique. It is no surprise that both thinkers thus find Rahner's soteriology "inadequate," precisely in its lack of any dramatic element.

Doubts Raised by the International Theological Commission

Several others have raised doubts about Rahner's place for Christ in the story of human salvation. Among the more amicable of such criticisms can be found in "Select Questions on the Theology of God the Redeemer," published by the Vatican's International Theological Commission (ITC) in 1995.⁴³ The text begins with "an outline of the authentic Christian teaching on redemption and its bearing on the human condition, as the Church has propounded this teaching in the course of her tradition." After anthropological considerations about "the human condition" which is seriously affected by sin, a brief survey of concepts similar to redemption in other major religions, and reflections about the human situation in the modern world, the text moves on to consider redemption from biblical and historical perspectives (Parts II and III, respectively). The latter is of particular interest here. In its discussion of medieval theologies of redemption, the document makes a distinction between a "descending," incarnational dimension of redemption which emphasizes God's initiative, and an "ascending" dimension of "legal restitution" embodied by "theor[ies] of sacrifice" and Anselm's notion of "vicarious satisfaction."⁴⁴

Rahner enters the discussion as a twentieth-century theologian "who wish[es] to restore the sense of God's 'descending' action on behalf of his needy creatures."⁴⁵ The whole idea of "expiatory sacrifice"—which the ITC has classified as "ascending"—is identified as repugnant to Rahner's sensibilities.⁴⁶ Rather than "expiator," Rahner's Christ is styled as "both God's irrevocable self-communication in grace and the acceptance of that self-communication by humanity."⁴⁷ The document does an admirable job of succinctly stating Rahner's asser-

43. International Theological Commission, "Select Questions on God the Redeemer," Vatican City 1995, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_1995_tologia-redenzione_en.html.

44. *Ibid.*, Part III, nn. 16, 25.

45. *Ibid.*, Part III, n. 30.

46. *Ibid.*, Part III, n. 30.

47. *Ibid.* Part III, n. 30, citing *FCF*, 194–95.

tion that Christ's redemptive role operates in accordance with "quasi-sacramental causality" (a topic to which we will devote significant attention below) in which "God's salvific will posits the sign, in this case the death of Jesus along with his resurrection, and in and through the sign it causes what is signified"; Christ himself is described as one such efficacious sign, "a symbolic reality."⁴⁸ The fruits of the redemption brought about in this way by Christ may, for Rahner, "be obtained through the acceptance of the inner self-communication of God which is given to all, as a 'supernatural existential.'"⁴⁹

In its evaluation of Rahner's contribution to recent soteriology, the ITC praises his emphasis upon God's ("descending") initiative and the human response to that love. It also notes that Rahner is able to circumvent many of the pitfalls associated with popular ("ascending") "legalistic" articulations of redemption.⁵⁰ However, it raises some suspicions which echo those voiced by Balthasar, especially concerning "the causal efficacy of the Christ event and especially to the redemptive character of Jesus' death on the Cross." Specifically, it asks, "Does the Christ-symbol simply express and communicate what is antecedently given in God's universal salvific will? Is God's inner word (as 'transcendental revelation') emphasized at the expense of the outer word given in the proclamation of the gospel as good news?"⁵¹ In other words, the ITC expresses the concern that for Rahner, salvation is extended as an offer to all through God's universally operative salvific will and appropriated via the "supernatural existential" which exists in the heart of every person; Christ, on the contrary, may "simply express" this widespread and continually ongoing occurrence.⁵²

Interestingly, Balthasar's critical evaluation finds another echo in the ITC's evaluation of Rahner. It is noteworthy that after making

48. *Ibid.*, Part III, n. 30.

49. *Ibid.*, Part III, n. 31.

50. *Ibid.*, n. 32.

51. *Ibid.*

52. The ITC's lukewarm and even wary evaluation, nevertheless infused with genuine respect and praise, bears a remarkable resemblance to an evaluation of Rahner's Christology and soteriology offered by Joseph Ratzinger in *Principles of Catholic Theology* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1987), 162–71. There, Ratzinger discusses the critique that Rahner's idea of universal orientation toward self-transcendence, which is "concretized" in Christ and his church, results in a "Christianity that is no more than a reflected universality" (166). To this, Ratzinger suggests, "Rahner could, of course, refute all this by saying that he, too, takes as his point of departure that which is inconceivably new, the *Event* that is the Savior. He could say that what is universal has now become that which saves only because, in this Savior, a universality of being has come to pass that could not emanate from being itself. I prefer to leave open the question of whether this does justice, on a conceptual level, to what is particular and unique in the salvation history that has its center in Christ" (*ibid.*).

a distinction between “ascending” and “descending” dimensions of redemption, Rahner’s own theology is explicitly associated with the “descending” movement (although, if pushed, the authors would likely acknowledge the “human response” element of Rahner’s theology as “ascending”).⁵³ In the section which follows its discussion of Rahner, titled “Retrieval of Earlier Tradition,” the ITC notes the efforts of “contemporary Catholic theologians [who] are seeking to maintain in tension the ‘descending’ and ‘ascending’ themes of classical soteriology.” It goes on to offer a “composite” sketch of this growing movement, which draws upon “Irenaeus, Augustine, and Thomas Aquinas” and which typically take the form of “narrative or dramatic” accounts.⁵⁴ These accounts, it notes, fulfill their “ascending” dimension not through “legalistic theories of restitution or penal substitution,” but rather

put the accent on what we might call representative headship. . . . Christ identifies himself with fallen humanity. He is the new Adam, the progenitor of redeemed humanity, the Head or the vine into whom individuals must be incorporated as members or branches. . . . The incarnate Word becomes the gathering point for the constitution of a reconciled and restored humanity.⁵⁵

This representative of ours, Christ, the ITC goes on to say, “identifies with sinful humanity and experiences the pain of its alienation from God”—a comment which echoes Balthasar’s call for a representative Savior who “endure[s] the alienating alienation.”⁵⁶

The presentation of “ascending” and “descending” soteriologies offered in the ITC’s “God the Redeemer” implicitly evaluate Rahner in a similar way as Balthasar has—namely, as a theologian whose theory of redemption stands opposite from categorizations of Christ as our “representative.” While Balthasar explicitly makes this claim, the ITC document suggests it by deeming Rahner a “descending” thinker and subsequently articulating representation as an alternative to “restitution”

53. As we will see below, Joseph Wong notes that Rahner himself makes the “ascending” and “descending” distinctions and that Rahner’s Christology and soteriology embody both aspects (although later in his career, Rahner especially emphasized the former).

54. ITC, “Select Questions on God the Redeemer,” Part III, n. 57. This latter remark makes it clear that Balthasar, whose *Theo-Drama* volumes discuss soteriology at length, is among the theologians being explicated.

55. ITC, “Select Questions on God the Redeemer,” Part III, nn. 38–39.

56. I would argue that this latter qualification about alienation need not be part of a “representative” soteriology, although the elements in the foregoing description quoted from the ITC constitute the very heart of such a category.

within the “ascending” group of soteriological concepts. Although the ITC clearly appreciates much of Rahner’s theology on this topic, the document’s reader is left with the impression that for Rahner, the heavy lifting, as it were, of the work of redemption is perhaps being carried out by God’s salvific will and the supernatural existential, and that the most fruitful path forward in Catholic theologies of redemption lies elsewhere, in a retrieval of the idea of “representation.”

Other Assessments of Rahner’s Christology

Framing the issue differently but touching on many of the same themes already discussed, Schubert Ogden⁵⁷ has contended that Rahner’s Christology ends up being “constitutive” (i.e., Christ as the *sine qua non* of human salvation) in name only, and in effect, collapses into normative (i.e., exemplary) Christology.⁵⁸ His succinct but overall fair treatment of Rahner (with whom he disagrees but who he still finds to be “ingenious,” “subtle,” and “nuanced”) notes that Rahner tries to avoid two soteriological alternatives which are often presented as exhaustive. On the one hand, most accounts of Christ as constitutive for salvation (in distinction from simply being its norm)⁵⁹ are framed in terms of the satisfaction theory, which Rahner believes almost inevitably to suggest that Jesus effects salvation by *changing God* (i.e., mollifying wrath, etc.; this sort of salvific efficacy accords with Gerald O’Collins’s description of “propitiation,” as it was understood in Greek paganism).⁶⁰ On the other hand, merely attributing a normative salvific role

57. Schubert M. Ogden, *Is There Only One True Religion or Are There Many?* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1992), 93–95.

58. Ogden uses the descriptor “representative” for what others (e.g., J. Dupuis, J. Wong) have labeled “normative.” This usage differs entirely from how we are using “representative” in this book (a usage which *coincides* with constitutive Christology, rather than standing as its mutually exclusive alternative).

59. In discussing a widely read article by J. P. Schineller (“Christ and Church: A Spectrum of Views,” *Theological Studies* 37, no. 4 (1976), 545–66), Brian McDermott, summarizes this distinction well: “By a constitutive position he means one according to which salvation would not be a reality if the life, death, and resurrection of Christ had not occurred; Christ is necessary and sufficient as the one who brings about salvation. A normative Christology, on the other hand, sees Christ as the supreme God-given norm, pattern, or example of salvation, in the light of which other legitimate paths to salvation may be illuminated, evaluated, and purified. No Christology can be constitutive without also being normative, but a Christology can be normative without being constitutive” (*Word Become Flesh: Dimensions in Christology* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1993), 283). Typically, conversations about Christ’s “constitutive” role in salvation occurs in the context of theology of religions, as theologians argue about the role and extent which Christ and non-Christian religions have in the salvation of non-Christian individuals. See Jacques Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1997.

60. This connection, which Rahner indeed makes, is rather unfair to satisfaction theory, but may be more accurately associated with (at least some versions of) penal substitution theory. On “propiti-

to Christ is not sufficient for Rahner, who wants to preserve the traditional claim that Christ uniquely causes of our salvation as its *sine qua non*, constitutive source.

As Ogden summarizes, Rahner avoids these two soteriological horns (in some places, at least) by turning to a Thomistic (and, more originally, Aristotelian) distinction between “efficient” and “final” causality. While the Christ-event cannot “efficiently” cause or bring about God’s salvific will (which is, rather, eternal and consistent), Jesus Christ *can be*, and in fact, *is* its “final” cause. Rahner explains this latter category by describing Christ as the “primal sacrament” who communicates grace according to the same kind of causality by which the sacraments operate. While Ogden does not elaborate much on Rahner’s favored causality, we will explore it in detail in the second chapter.

Although Ogden has a great respect for Rahner’s efforts, he, without “claiming to offer an adequate criticism of Rahner’s . . . thesis,” finds it unconvincing.⁶¹ In Ogden’s judgment, Rahner’s attempt to split the horns of propitiation and normative Christology ends up crashing into either of the two boundaries. He explains,

If there is a real and not merely verbal difference in the Christ event’s not being the efficient cause of God’s saving will, but being its final cause instead, then, so far as I can see, the Christ event is not really constitutive of salvation after all, but only representative [= normative] of it, similar to the way in which sacraments in general are thus representative. If, on the other hand, the Christ event is different enough from sacraments generally not only to represent God’s saving will but also really constitute it, then, in my view, there is not a real, but only verbal, difference in its being called the final cause of God’s will to save instead of its efficient cause.⁶²

In Ogden’s final judgment, Rahner’s idea of Christ as “primal sacrament” and “final cause” is consistent more with a normative rather than constitutive Christology. (Ogden himself opts for such a normative position and appropriates Rahner’s terminology of Christ as “primal sacrament”; he does, on the contrary, claim that “Jesus is constitutive of *Christianity*.”⁶³)

While Ogden recognizes Rahner’s (allegedly unfulfilled) desire to affirm a constitutive Christology, J.T. Farmer goes so far as to simply

tiation,” see O’Collins, *Jesus Our Redeemer: A Christian Approach to Salvation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 15–18.

61. Ogden, *Is There Only One True Religion or Are There Many?*, 94.

62. *Ibid.*

63. *Ibid.*, 96–97, emphasis added.

categorize Rahner's Christology as normative. According to such a position, "Salvation, always possible for all humanity even apart from Christ, becomes normatively present in him."⁶⁴ Such a position, in fact, matches quite nicely with the criticisms which Balthasar has leveled at Rahner—namely, that Christ, one graced human among many, is merely "the most successful instance" of a humanity to which God self-communicates. Such a normative categorization of Rahner is convincingly rebutted by Joseph Wong in an article cited by Farmer (mistakenly, it seems, in support of) himself.⁶⁵

Finally, a more specific criticism about Christ's efficacy in Rahner's soteriology concerns the role of the cross. Using Rahner, Schillebeeckx, and other twentieth-century theologians as a foil to compare against his own soteriology, Thomist Rik Van Nieuwenhove says that Rahner "fail[s] – or refuse[s] – to attribute any salvific significance to the cross of Christ."⁶⁶ Such a critique is at once more specific and more severe than those above. Rather than the salvific efficacy of the entire Christ-event, Van Nieuwenhove hones in on Christ's passion and death. Moreover, beyond accusing Rahner of granting the cross only "normative" meaning rather than the constitutive efficacy of a *sine qua non*, Van Nieuwenhove charges Rahner with denying any positive salvific significance for it *at all*. Against such a position, he retorts that "emptying the death of Jesus of all salvific power contradicts the New Testament witness (including, in all likelihood, the way Jesus himself viewed his passion) and the ensuing tradition of Christian reflection on the cross."⁶⁷

Summary: Critical Evaluations of Rahner's Christ as Savior

These critical assessments of Karl Rahner's Christology and soteriology coalesce around the constitutive place for Jesus Christ as the *sine qua non* of salvation. Almost all of these assessments recognize Rahner's insistence upon Jesus being the symbol or sacrament of human sal-

64. Jerry T. Farmer, "Four Christological Themes of the Theology of Karl Rahner," in *The Myriad Christ: Plurality and the Quest for Unity in Contemporary Christology*, eds. T. Merrigan and J. Haers (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2000), 433–62, at 455.

65. Joseph H. Wong, "Anonymous Christians: Karl Rahner's Pneuma-Christocentrism and an East-West Dialogue," in *Theological Studies* 55, no. 4 (1994), 609–37.

66. Rik Van Nieuwenhove, "'Bearing the Marks of Christ's Passion': Aquinas' Soteriology," in *The Theology of Thomas Aquinas*, eds. Rik Van Nieuwenhove and Joseph Wawrykow (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), 277–302, at 277. Van Nieuwenhove's entry here overlaps with and expands upon an earlier essay, "St Anselm and St Thomas Aquinas on 'Satisfaction': Or how Catholic and Protestant Understandings of the Cross Differ," *Angelicum* 80 (2003): 159–76.

67. Van Nieuwenhove, "Bearing the Marks of Christ's Passion," 278.

vation, that is, the highest and culminating moment of God's salvific action within human affairs. But his critics' evaluations raise the question of whether such a role grants Jesus Christ a sufficient place within God's plan of salvation.

Balthasar's worry is that for Rahner, God is always already reconciled to humanity; rather than being humanity's "representative" (a role which, in his judgment, would impede on Rahner's particular and mistaken notion of human freedom), Christ is one man among many humans who is not essentially different from them. His role consists of standing as the prime instance of—and thus, grand announcement about—a larger ongoing process in which humans are being saved by God's grace. Unlike a schema of "representation," such a role falls woefully short of deeming Christ the constitutive *sine qua non* of human salvation.⁶⁸

Two other theologians, Guy Mansini and George Vass, produce critical evaluations which resemble and explicitly cite that of Balthasar. Mansini judges that Rahner's "sacramental" theory of the cross's salvific efficacy only grants a "restrained" level of causality, that event of Christ's death is, for Rahner, a mere "demonstration," and that Rahner "jettison[s]" any notion of Christ "representing" humanity. Vass echoes Balthasar in lamenting the lack of any dramatic element in Rahner's soteriology, precisely in his rejection of any "representative" action on the part of Christ, who is merely the locus at which an inevitable, preordained divine plan unfolds as a matter of course. For both Vass and Mansini, the role which Christ plays in Rahner's account human salvation is rather thin, for he fails to "represent" us and functions more or less as a display board which notifies us of God's loving will being carried out.

Also similar to Balthasar (though to a lesser degree), the ITC suggests that for Rahner, Christ merely *expresses* something (namely, the grace of salvation and fellowship with God) which is already available through God's universally operative salvific will. Again, the role of Christ extracted from Rahner's work seems, more than anything else, to be that of "notifier." The ITC also portrays (though less explicitly than Balthasar does) Rahner and "representative" Christology as inhabiting paradigms distinct from one another. And once again, the under-

68. Cf. Balthasar's remark about Rahner's God "who-is-always-reconciled": "This does not mean that the perfect Yes to God on the part of the man Jesus is *the condition without which* neither the world nor *salvation would be possible*" (TD 4:276, emphasis added).

lying worry appears to be that “expressing” salvation seems like a rather weak role for the constitutive Savior.

Finally, Schubert Ogden (along with J.T. Farmer) explicitly identifies Rahner’s Christology as lacking an authentic “constitutive” identity. According to Ogden, Rahner’s exchange of Christ’s “efficient” causative role (typically associated with staurocentric satisfaction and substitution theories of atonement) for a “final” and “sacramental” causality ends up rendering Christ a kind of “norm” for human salvation: any “constitutive” dimension seems to exist in name only, a dimension desired by Rahner, which his Christology and soteriology never end up fulfilling. Van Nieuwenhove goes even further, saying that in his desire to move away from classical cross-centered soteriologies, Rahner (and many other contemporary Catholic theologians) has left the cross bereft of any salvific significance at all.

There are two major issues which surface repeatedly in these evaluations, the first of which concerns the “constitutive” vs. “normative” distinction. While only Ogden and Farmer raise the issue of whether Christ is for Rahner in fact (and not just in desire) constitutive of salvation, at the heart of each of these objections is a concern that Christ is not the *sine qua non* of salvation. While Jesus may exemplify, notify, and express God’s salvation within the world, it is not clear, especially given Rahner’s supposed distaste for talk of Christ as “representative,” that if the Christ-event⁶⁹ never occurred, neither would human salvation. Rahner’s Christology and soteriology thus fail to live up to the “christocentric” descriptor which is so often applied to him.

The second main concern involves the notion of Christ’s “representing” the entire human family. Balthasar, Vass, and (though to a lesser extent) the ITC all, though to various degrees, envision such representation in “dramatic” categories centering on a discrete, particular *act* performed by Christ in our stead, undergoing the alienation from God properly due to the rest of us. Since Rahner eschews this latter kind of dramatic, act-centered vision of reconciliation via proxy, his soteriology is presented in juxtaposition to the broad category of representation.

69. By this term, I wish to indicate the entirety of Christ’s incarnation, life, death, and resurrection.

Symbol and Sacrament: The Standard Classification of Rahner's Christology and Soteriology

The criticisms above, directed toward a very influential theologian, have certainly not gone unnoticed. Several of them have received explicit, published responses which defend a profound and meaningful place for Christ in Rahner's understanding of human salvation. The standard method by which such apologies are conducted shares a particular evaluation with the criticisms: Rahner's Christology and soteriology are best classified according to the category of symbol and/or sacrament. But while Rahner's critics go on to portray sacramental or symbolic causality as weak and ineffectual, his advocates describe it in far different terms: Christ, the *Realsymbol* and *Ursakrament* is the nexus point of God's self-communication to the world. In other words, the broad apologetic strategy is to accuse Rahner's critics of underestimating the value of positing Christ as the primordial Sacrament of salvation.

Sympathetic Synopses: Edwards and Ryan

Though neither is an apology for Rahner, two of the most succinct and accessible accounts of his soteriology can be found in Denis Edwards's *What Are They Saying About Salvation?*⁷⁰ and Robin Ryan's recent *Jesus and Salvation*.⁷¹ Both works address various theologies of salvation from biblical and historical perspectives, and subsequently, focus on accounts of a more recent vintage, including that of Karl Rahner. Let us consider each.

Edwards follows a common approach to explaining Rahner, beginning with some of the early philosophical claims made by Rahner about the *anthropos* drawn from *Spirit in the World* (1939)⁷² and *Hearer of the Word* (1941)⁷³ in order to introduce his later, properly theological work. Without naming it, Edwards makes reference in this introduction to

70. Denis Edwards, *What Are They Saying About Salvation?* (New York: Paulist Press, 1986).

71. Robin Ryan, *Jesus and Salvation: Soundings in the Christian Tradition and Contemporary Theology* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2015).

72. *Spirit in the World* (New York: Continuum, 1994). Originally published as *Geist in Welt: Zur Metaphysik der endlichen Erkenntnis bei Thomas von Aquin* (Innsbruck: Rauch, 1939).

73. *Hearer of the Word: Laying the Foundation for a Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Continuum, 1994). Originally published as *Hörer des Wortes: Zur Grundlegung einer Religionsphilosophie* (München: Kösel, 1941).

Rahner's *Vorgriff*, a term which is notoriously difficult to translate (often "pre-apprehension").⁷⁴ The act of knowing finite and limited things occurs, he explains, "along with, or over against, an implicit awareness of the whole range of being that is without limits. We know specific objects against an horizon of infinite mystery."⁷⁵ While we do not "grasp" (*greifen*) or have a grasp (*Griff*) upon this infinite, mysterious horizon which exists as the background against which all finite entities are known, we do encounter it in an anticipatory mode of approach through our (even daily) acts of cognition. This relationship to the undergirding, infinite horizon provides a basis for speaking of the human person as "self-transcendent," as a finite creature within the world which is nevertheless oriented and even called toward an existence fully enveloped by Mystery itself, which Rahner identifies as God.

God's offer of salvation, Edwards explains, is for Rahner an offer of nothing less than God's very self through the gift of grace. God's self-offer in grace is ever present through what Rahner calls the "supernatural existential," an invitation toward creaturely participation in God's own life.⁷⁶ Sin consists in the rejection of this offer, while salvation is realized through its reception. Such reception (and rejection) of this transcendental offer occurs through and is expressed by our free, historical, and day-to-day acts and choices. Rahner thus, on occasion, even speaks of "self-redemption," signaling not a Pelagian account of salvation apart from grace, but rather, our grace-driven appropriation of "objective redemption" brought about by God—in particular, through Jesus Christ.⁷⁷

Edwards is clear that for Rahner, such appropriation does not consist of merely aspiring to model oneself after an exemplar Christ whose only impact upon us comes by way of "moral influence." An alternative and more robust notion of Christ's salvific causality exists for Rahner's Christ.⁷⁸ Moreover, the idea in the popular imagination of Christ's death propitiating God's wrath by somehow altering his mind and will is *not* a viable candidate for such an alternative. Instead, the causal

74. For an extended and careful treatment of this term in light of Rahner's theological aesthetics, see the dissertation of Peter J. Fritz, *Sublime Apprehension: A Catholic, Rahnerian Construction*, Diss., University of Notre Dame, 2010, revised and published as *Karl Rahner's Theological Aesthetics* (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2014).

75. Edwards, *What Are They Saying About Salvation?*, 19.

76. *Ibid.*

77. *Ibid.*, 24.

78. *Ibid.*, 23–25.

impact which Christ has upon our salvation, Edwards explains, is, for Karl Rahner, that of a primal Sacrament.

Rahner's "basic thesis" is that Christ's "death and resurrection are connected to the salvation of all men and women by way of sacramental causality. . . . The cross is a sacramental cause of our salvation in that it is the sign and the mediation of God's salvation. It is the sign of the 'victorious and irreversible' saving activity of God in our world."⁷⁹ Edwards makes two main points in this summary of Rahner's "sacramental" soteriology. The first is that as the *Realsymbol* (Edwards uses this German term as an equivalent for "sacrament") of God's salvific grace, the Christ-event, especially the Paschal Mystery, is at once *caused by* grace and the *cause of* grace, in different respects. Insofar as his life and identity perfectly express and unveil God's Reign within the world, Christ the sacrament is *caused by* and has its origin in God's grace.⁸⁰ But with respect to *us*, to whom Christ mediates the grace which he embodies in its temporal fullness, Christ the primal sacrament is the *cause of* grace which, like other sacraments, causes precisely that which it signifies or symbolizes. The entire life of Jesus, the *Realsymbol* of salvation, perfectly signifies God's grace; moreover, this life is "recapitulated" and "fulfilled" in Jesus's "free acceptance of death" and his glorious resurrection.⁸¹

The second point which Edwards makes is that as God's *Realsymbol* or primal Sacrament, Jesus has rendered God's saving will "irrevocable" within the world. The whole of salvation history, he explains, is marked by a kind of "ambivalence," but God chooses "to give concrete and irreversible expression in history to divine saving love." That is, God chooses "to give fixed historical form to the universal will to save" in Jesus Christ, who fully accepts (including *and especially* in his death) God's self-offer.⁸²

Although it does not engage in any defense of Rahner, Edwards's account offers resources for answering criticisms that Rahner's Christ exists merely as a "notification" to the world that God is enacting human salvation. If *Realsymbol* or "sacrament" were to be understood simply as a shallow "sign," such a criticism would have merit. However, as the primal sacrament, Christ does not only signify, but *causes* in the

79. *Ibid.*, 26.

80. "Jesus had preached the saving nearness of God, and he had claimed that this reign of God was identified with his own person. . . . The resurrection shows that Jesus is indeed the final and unsurpassable self-disclosure of God. He is the absolute Savior" (*ibid.*, 25).

81. *Ibid.*, 27.

82. *Ibid.*