Andrew Stinnett

Profile of a Christian Theologian

Karl Rahner

**Biography**

Karl Rahner was born in Freiburg in Breisgau, Germany in 1904, into a middle class family, the fourth of seven children.[[1]](#endnote-1) Rahner described his family as a normal Catholic family and his childhood as unremarkable.[[2]](#endnote-2) After graduating from secondary school at age 18 in 1922 Rahner entered the Roman Catholic religious order of the Society of Jesus (the Jesuits) following his brother Hugo who had entered the community three years earlier.[[3]](#endnote-3) Developing a fluency in Latin, Rahner would go on to teach Latin for two years from 1927 to 1929 during a break between his study of philosophy and theology.[[4]](#endnote-4)

Rahner would be ordained as Jesuit Priest in 1932 and would go on to earn his doctorate degree with some struggle as his first dissertation was rejected.[[5]](#endnote-5) In 1937 Rahner would begin his thirty-four year career as a professor of theology during the winter semester at the University of Innsbruck.[[6]](#endnote-6) He would only spend one year at Innsbruck due to a Nazi occupation of the university in which Rahner would be expelled.[[7]](#endnote-7) He would move to Vienna where he would spend the next five years serving as a pastor and a teacher as the Second World War ravaged Europe.[[8]](#endnote-8) As a parish priest Rahner would provide pastoral care and helped to obtain food for the needy.[[9]](#endnote-9)

After the war Rahner would confront his own lack of valor spending the time in the relative safety of Vienna and would question why Pope Pius XII and the Church were not more vocal about the war.[[10]](#endnote-10) Rahner would go on to be one of the most important Christian writers and theologians of the twentieth century and although he was a prolific writer he would on no account neglect his pastoral duties.[[11]](#endnote-11) Rahner had ongoing conflicts with the Vatican over “eucharistic (sic)[[12]](#endnote-12) issues and Mariology” for which he was censored in 1962.[[13]](#endnote-13) Rahner would continue his “worldwide lecturing, writing and pastoral activity” until his death in 1984 in Innsbruck Austria.[[14]](#endnote-14)

**Theology Themes and Contributions**

Rahner’s basic thesis revolves around self-communication with God. He says God desires a close personal relationship with all humans, invites them to be a part of the divine, and extends this offer to all people, not just Christians.[[15]](#endnote-15) Since humans have free will they may accept this offer or reject it as they so desire.[[16]](#endnote-16) Vital to Rahner’s thesis is his belief that mysticism, which is open to everyone not just priests, is essential to making the connection with God.[[17]](#endnote-17) Harvey Egan says that Rahner has a sapiential theology aimed at discovering wisdom and truth from a practical Christian point of view rather than coming from a scholarly discourse.[[18]](#endnote-18) Rahner refers to himself as a “theological dilettante” rather than an “academic scholar”.[[19]](#endnote-19)Although Rahner’s mother worried that he would become “proud”, throughout his distinguished career he referred to himself “as a man, a Christian and a priest”.[[20]](#endnote-20)

One of Rahner’s major accomplishments was to put the theology of the Catholic Church on a “transcendental footing”.[[21]](#endnote-21) Rahner believed that all theological queries had to be viewed through transcendental lenses and that “theological anthropology” must also be “transcendent anthropology”.[[22]](#endnote-22) Rahner was heavily influenced by patristic theology and particularly by Thomas Aquinas, Kant, and Hegel with St. Ignatius having the greatest impact.[[23]](#endnote-23) He was also heavily influenced by Martin Heidegger and referred to him as a “great master”.[[24]](#endnote-24) Rahner himself would argue that the theology of Ignatius was “extraordinarily profound” and his work *Spiritual Exercises,* “a masterpiece of meditations and contemplation on Christ’s life, death, and resurrection.” [[25]](#endnote-25) He would go on to say that Ignatius’ influence was more important and significant to him than any of his formal education.[[26]](#endnote-26)

**Current Relevance**

Rahner has been called the “father of Roman Catholic theology” and the “quiet mover of the Catholic Church”.[[27]](#endnote-27) He was a Jesuit Priest, a professor, an author, a philosopher and a great theologian.[[28]](#endnote-28) He wrote over four-thousand different works including numerous books that have been translated into multiple languages.[[29]](#endnote-29) Rahner played a significant role in developing the theology of the Catholic Church through his contributions during Vatican II.[[30]](#endnote-30) He was instrumental in bringing Thomist philosophy into a conversation with the views of philosophy in the modern age.[[31]](#endnote-31) Rahner is attributed with bringing fresh air into the Catholic Church with his ideas of free speech within the church and with his “theology of freedom”.[[32]](#endnote-32) His profound influence on the Catholic Church continues today.

Rahner’s influence however was and is not confined to the Catholic Church. He is not unlike his contemporary Thomas Merton whose influence also went far beyond the walls of the Abby of Gethsemani. Rahner’s books are all still in print and he continues to influence people more than fifteen years after his death. All of his works were simply grounded in a praxis that was the everyday life of a parish minister dealing with the everyday problems of his parishioners .[[33]](#endnote-33) Although he received great acclaim for his writings and his position on various theological issues Karl Rahner remained grounded as a humble servant of God.

1. Eagan, Egan D., *Karl Rahner: The Mystick of Everyday Life* (The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1998), p. 19. and Marmion, Declan and Mary E. Hines, *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Rahner,* (Cambridge University Press 2005) p. 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Egan, p.20. and Marmion, p.2. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Egan, p. 21-22. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Egan, p. 23. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Dych, William V., *Rahner*. (Bloomsbury Academic, London, 2000). P. 9. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Rahner, Karl,  *I Remember*. (The Crossroad Publishing Company, New York 1984). P. 51 and 63. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Egan, p. 24. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Eucharistic should be capitalized but is not in the Egan book. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Egan, p. 26. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Egan, p. 27. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Rahner, Karl, *Foundations of Christian faith: An introduction to the idea of Christianity*. ( The Crossroad Publishing Company, New York,1982) P. 128. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Rahner, Karl, *The Mystical May in Everyday Life*, (Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY, 2010) p. xv. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Marmion, p. xv and 13. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Ibid, p.13. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Egan, p. 19 and Marmion, p. 13 [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Marmion, p. 29. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Egan, p. 22. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Egan, p. 28. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Marmion, 13. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Ibid, 65. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Ibid [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Ibid, p. 83. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)