

**“Direct experience of God”:
a quest for refinement and illumination in
Christian faith and practice**

Jennifer Slater

Department of Philosophy and Systematic Theology
University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

Abstract

“Direct experience of God”, a concept that is frequently used by theologians, was a topic Simon Maimela wrestled with in conjunction with his students since its meaning became increasingly complicated through the processes of secularisation. In the 1960’s, it was asserted that modern people cannot have a direct experience of God; albeit one could still live by faith and by commitment to religious values in a world which claimed that “God is dead”. This article explores the concept “experiencing God directly” according to Karl Rahner, who situates a direct experience of God in a human self-transcendent (philosophical-theological) environment. This article is an effort to return to theology’s historical quest of ascertaining the experiential relevance of God in a human milieu that is often riddled with social, human, economic, political and cultural complexities. It is also a tribute to Simon Maimela, who did not hesitate to present his students with theologically challenging topics for academic exploration.

Introduction

In the 1990’s, when Simon Maimela was a lecturer in Systematic Theology at Unisa, he challenged his honours students by tasking them to write an assignment on the concept “experiencing God *directly*”. Maimela used the word “directly” from the writings of Karl Rahner. This topic fascinated me and filled me with enthusiasm, and it certainly warrants further research. Maimela instructed us to explore the concept by focusing on the word “directly”. No doubt, he was aware that the predominant claim of the human being’s potential to experience God directly was challenged by the 20th century upsurge of interest in mysticism, both Eastern and Western. He did not mean that students should be completely au fait with Rahner’s writings, but that we had to discuss the concept and possibility of experiencing God directly. This article is an attempt to go beyond what Maimela instructed his students to do

by determining precisely what Rahner means when he uses the concept “experiencing God *directly*”. It does not set out to prove whether or not direct experience of God is possible, nor does it try to prove that God exists because of the possibility of a direct experience. The departure point for Rahner is: since an “experience of God” is deeply rooted in the authentic presence of God in history, a direct experience of God cannot take place anywhere else but in the concrete historical context of life. According to Rahner’s analysis, each person has the potential to have a direct experience of God. In this sense, this article endeavours to honour and meet the academic challenge of Maimela by investigating this complicated theological concept in the philosophical and theological writings of Rahner. Bearing in mind that Rahner is among the most widely recognised thinkers to grapple with the philosophical aspects of experiencing God directly, it is not surprising that Maimela quoted him for a topic for an assignment. However, considering the complexity of Rahner’s writings, such a challenge to honours students can only be considered “cutting edge”.

Experiencing God directly in Rahner’s theology of transcendence

Since the God that Christians claim to experience (as for all the great theistic religions) differs from humanity, Rahner focuses on the issue of experiencing God directly by explaining it in terms of transcendent experiences. His theology is built upon the firm belief that Christians know and experience God directly, but it takes place in what he calls an “unthematic way”. As a theologian, Rahner operates from the premise that every person has an unthematic experience of God; through reflection, the prior preconscious experience of God can be brought to a thematic and conscious experience of God. For Rahner, a direct experience of God is intrinsic to the constitution of every human being and is therefore experienced by every human being in a preconscious way. Moreover, the conscious experience of God is open to all human beings, and not only in mystical situations.

Apart from Rahner’s strong philosophical and theological basis, his understanding of a direct experience of God also springs from a profound personal faith experience of God. His personal testimony of directly experiencing God forms the foundation of his theology. He writes:

I have experienced God directly. I have experienced God, the nameless and unfathomable one, the one who is silent and yet near in the Trinity of his approach to me. I have really encountered God, the true and living one, the one for whom this name that quenches all names is fitting, God Himself. I have experienced God himself, not some human words about him.

This experience is not barred to anyone. I want to communicate it to others as well as I can. (as quoted by Vorgrimler 1986:11)

As the source of Rahner’s theological thought we find a deep and simple faith that is permeated with a rare passion for the incomprehensible God. In his perception of a direct experience of God, the philosophical experiences of a far-away, silent, inaccessible God and the intimate Christian experiences of the ineffable nearness of the same God in the forgiving and sheltering grace of Jesus Christ form a mutual and complementary totality. God, for Rahner, is rooted in a deeply personal reality (that is, in his own direct experience of God as cited above by Vorgrimler). His own direct experiences of God confirm his profound conviction and firmness of faith so that he can say, without doubt, that his faith in God will remain unshaken even if Holy Scripture did not exist (Vorgrimler on Rahner 1986:11). He claims that the complete clarity and sureness of his personal experience of God is a dimension of the experience of himself as a person created by God. For this reason, he encourages people to enter into themselves to discover their innermost depths in order to become fully aware of themselves and therefore be free to communicate with God. Rahner is convinced that a person’s relationship with God remains alive only through a direct encounter with God.

God is experienced as a dimension of all spatio-temporal realities

Experiencing God implies two presuppositions: (1) that God is a reality that exists and (2) that there is such a possibility as “an experience of God”. The concept has two further implications: firstly, that the experience should have a special and peculiar quality of its own which differentiates it from other experiences and, secondly, that there is something more, something different and something more fundamental in the experience than the knowledge of God that is acquired through so-called proofs of God’s existence (Rahner 1974a:149). If God exists, it is conceivable (indeed imperative) that some experience of God takes place in our lives; however, the entire notion of experiencing God directly theoretically calls God’s transcendence into question. How can God (who is understood to be non-spatio-temporal, utterly transcendent and uncreated) be directly experienced by a human person who, in turn, is totally other than God and created by God. Rahner describes an experience of God that is similar to a mystical experience as a unitive experience between the experienced subject and the experiencing object (that is, without intermediaries). How is a direct experience between God and humanity possible, and what exactly amounts to a direct experience?

Rahner makes it clear that a human being experiences God in a qualitatively different manner from that in which one human being experiences another human being (Rahner 1989:45). Experiencing God has a number of

differentiating characteristics. Apart from the fact that we experience spatio-temporal realities directly through our senses, we can also distinguish one concrete experience from another. An added obvious factor is that the person is normally capable of describing the limits of the experience. According to Rahner, humanity experiences God in and through spatio-temporal realities. A person's experience of God occurs in his or her "categorical encounter with concrete reality in our world, both the world of things and the world of persons" (Rahner 1989:52). The experience of God is, however, classified as a transcendental experience: the person's "basic and original orientation towards absolute mystery, which constitutes his/her fundamental experience of God, is a permanent existential of humanity as a spiritual subject" (Rahner 1989:52). God is therefore experienced as a dimension of all spatio-temporal realities. The experience of God, says Rahner, is not an encounter with an individual object alongside the other objects. One cannot therefore speak of the experience of God and the experience of spatio-temporal realities separately because God is a dimension of all reality (Rahner 1989:54).

By presenting an experience of God as a dimension of all spatio-temporal experiences, Rahner argues that God can be experienced everywhere in everyday life. For Rahner, God is present in the whole of everyday life, but is experienced as the infinite horizon within which every finite object is apprehended. Hence God remains forever hidden and unknown and is never the direct object of our knowledge, but is rather glimpsed in the knowledge of concrete things. On this level the experience of God is always "transcendental". By this Rahner means that such an experience of God transcends the way that we grasp spatio-temporal objects. He maintains that God is not a person like created persons any more than the horizon of objective knowledge is an object like other objects within the horizon. This experience of God forms part of the incomprehensible horizon of human experience. All this makes sense only when we understand what is meant by the absolute unlimited transcendentality of the human spirit.

For Rahner, God remains at all times the Absolute Mystery (Rahner 1989:57). In this sense, God will always remain unintelligible to the human person, experienced only as the horizon and goal of human transcendence in knowledge and freedom (Rahner 1966:36). As the horizon remains beyond our grasp, so too God remains incomprehensible: the absolute mystery beyond the grasp of direct human knowledge, but always present in absolute immediacy (Rahner 1979:277, 243, 244 & 254).

However, there is a sense in which God is known experientially. The transcendent experience brings what Rahner calls "unthematic knowledge" of God. This knowledge is always present, not just when spoken. It is an experience because the knowledge, though unthematic, "is a moment within and a condition of possibility for every concrete experience in any and every object" (Rahner 1989:20). By this, Rahner means that everyone has a prior,

preconscious unthematic experience of God and (as self-transcendent beings) humanity is always orientated towards the holy and absolute mystery. “This unthematic and ever present experience, this knowledge of God, which we always have even when we are thinking of, and are concerned with, anything but God, is the permanent ground from out of which the thematic knowledge of God emerges which we have in explicitly religious activity and in philosophical reflection” (Rahner 1989:53). The unthematic experience of God in everyday life remains anonymous and unreflected; it is “like the generally diffusely extended light of the sun that we do not see as such, turning instead to the individual objects of our sensuous experience as they become visible in the light” (Rahner 1985:66). All thematic talk about God is therefore always rooted in and points to a transcendent unthematized experience. To understand the notion of a thematic and unthematic experience of God depends on an understanding of Rahner’s anthropology.

Rahner anthropology as the key to understanding humanity’s direct experience of God

Rahner’s whole theology flows from his anthropology and it begins with the conviction that all human beings are essentially oriented to the divine. In *Hearers of the Word*, he describes the human person in terms of his or her “obediential potency” whereby he or she is by nature endowed with an openness to experience God (Rahner 1969:66). The foundation of Rahner’s anthropology lies in the *Vorgriff* (the preconscious grasp of God that is present in every human being). This *Vorgriff* is inherent in human nature and by means of this anticipation, a person is capable of asking questions of *being*. In this light, a person is perceived as a being that has already experienced God in a dim and unreflexive way. God, though hidden and unknown, is experienced as the infinite horizon that is glimpsed in the knowledge of concrete things (Rahner, as quoted by Carr 1973: 362).

Despite the fact that the human being’s direct knowledge of God is limited to that which can be perceived through the senses, it contains an awareness of oneself as spirit and as one which transcends the world of immediate experiences. As a self-transcendent being, the human being is capable of striving beyond limits and searching always for something more. To speak of a person as self-transcendent means that the person is able to reach out to that which transcends it – indeed, to the infinite ground of all reality (Rahner 1985:65).

While he recognises human beings as spirit, Rahner at the same time acknowledges that they live in a concrete world. Simply by being spirit, a person is open to the possible revelation of God – should it occur. As spirit, a person exists on the border between God and the world, and time and eternity (Rahner 1967:88). Cognizance should be taken of Rahner’s understanding of

two kinds of spirit: "Infinite Spirit" (which is the Absolute Spirit of God) and "finite spirit" (the spirit of human beings). These are closely related. The human spirit is spirit because it is created with the capacity to experience and discern the Infinite Being that is God. The human spirit comes from God and returns to God. God therefore remains at all times the goal of a person's movement. By being spirit in the world, a person knows and experiences in and through the world. However, by virtue of being spirit (*Geist in der Welt* – spirit in the world), a person is also a "self-transcending" being. Hence his or her experiences both of the world and of God occur through spatio-temporal realities.

Another important aspect of Rahner's anthropology is his idea of the "supernatural existential". The supernatural existential consists in the acceptance that humanity's very being is stamped and altered by its call to unity with God. This is an aspect of grace. Grace for Rahner is not static, but rather the dynamic and personal self-communication of God (Carr 1973:362). The self-communication presupposes openness and this openness is present in humanity as an existential orientation towards God. It is grace that orientates a human being to what Rahner calls an "immediate experience" of God. By means of grace, the human being is transformed in Rahner refers to as "humanity's entitive alteration". This transformed state refers to humanity's nature not as pure nature but as "graced nature", hence the understanding that humanity is "supernaturally orientated" towards God. "Such an existential penetrates the human's conscious existence, his/her knowledge and experience, even if only in an implicit and unthematised way" (Carr, quoting Rahner 1973:364). The supernatural existential involves an expansion of the a priori openness in which the person is conscious in being conscious.

It is difficult to organise Rahner's anthropological insights regarding a person's experience of God in a coherent fashion while trying at the same time to be faithful to its rich diversity and complexity. In practical terms, the fundamental characteristic of human existence (according to Rahner's anthropology) is that humanity's uniqueness lies in its essential orientation to God and that we are conscious of ourselves as self-transcendent beings who are always striving beyond our limits. We possess an unlimited drive to understand, but with finite capabilities; we are immersed in a finite world and at the same time we have an infinite ability to question; we are historical creatures who are immersed in a world of space and time. Our realities in this world are not an accidental addition to our transcendence, but precisely the situation through which we actualise ourselves. It is in this situation that we experience God directly. We do not and cannot escape the limitations of our creatureliness, our bodilyness and our immersion in the rhythm of time and space – not even in the direct experience of God. Because of the transcendental dimension of our existence, we are in a position to experience God directly. But we are also in a position to deny or to say "no" to the infinite

source that we call God – a denial that is made all the more easier by our spatio-temporal limitations (Rahner 1961:311).

Rahner’s anthropology argues that all of humanity possesses characteristics which involve openness to the infinite: the human person is *spirit*, self-transcendent, capable of asking questions about being, free, responsible and immortal. But the human person also has qualities of being severely limited: material, finite, historical, sexual, temporal, communal and subject to death. The latter qualities are not limitations to experience God, but are rather the matrix or gateway to the spiritual. Once we grasp the basic idea of Rahner’s anthropology, it is somewhat easier to understand his description of thematised and unthematised direct experiences of God.

Thematised and unthematised direct experiences of God

As mentioned earlier, Rahner’s theology is built on the conviction that all people know and experience God directly. This direct experience of God comes in two forms: the thematised form and the unthematised form of direct experiences. One should keep in mind that these unthematic and thematic forms are not two separate experiences, but that the one presupposes the other. The unthematic experience forms the basis of the thematic experience; the two are integral to each other and an intrinsic awareness on both levels constitutes a *single* direct experience of God. The two experiences do, however, have distinct characteristics that pertain to their respective natures.

The direct nature of the unthematic experience of God

Rahner refers to the original preconscious, unthematic experience as the primitive experience of God that grounds all other experiences of God. This is inevitably present in the depths of ordinary life (Rahner 1989:57) and is constantly present as the secret ingredient of all our particular experiences (Rahner 1989:35). The unthematic experience of God is deeply buried within our daily activities and because it is anonymous by nature, it is often overlooked or unrecognised. This unthematic experience of God is directly present in each human being regardless of him or her being objectively aware of it (Rahner 1985:48).

The direct nature of the unthematic experience of God is constituted by the original orientation of the human person towards God, the Absolute and incomprehensible mystery (Rahner 1989:52). This experience is described by Rahner as a permanent existential of the human being as a spiritual subject, and it is regarded as direct due to it being constantly and directly present in human nature. Rahner says that in the unthematised direct experience of God “God encounters man in silence, encounters him as the absolute and incomprehensible” (Rahner 1989:21).

Thematising the unthematic experience of God

In order for an unthematic experience to be known or possessed with conscious awareness, it is necessary that the original unthematic experience be transposed and made thematic. According to Rahner's theological anthropology, every person possesses the natural openness or potency to transpose the experience and to make it thematic (Rahner 1975:175). Rahner is adamant that a person "should be challenged to discover this universally present experience of God and to objectify it conceptually" (Rahner 1989:454).

To thematise unthematic experiences of God does not mean that the experiences are suddenly transformed into direct experiences of God. What occurs is that the unthematised direct experience of God is brought to our awareness and expressed in spatio-temporal categories. In this sense, we can and have to speak about God only by means of secondary and categorical concepts (Rahner 1989:71), but this does not make the experience indirect; in fact, it is direct as far as the human person can experience God directly. By thematising the original experience of God, we deepen, invigorate and bring to the fore the primal, ontological and transcendental relationship of humanity to God. We do not discover complete knowledge of God because we still experience God as ineffable and incomprehensible. Rahner argues that in making the unthematic experience thematic, one allows "oneself to be grasped and mastered by the mystery of god, which is ever present and ever distant. The mystery of God remains, even though it reveals itself to humanity in various ways, directly and indirectly" (Rahner 1989:56).

The ability to bring the preconscious experience of the infinite into conscious awareness is a further dimension of the fact that we are spirit in the world. Since the embodied spirit of a person only knows through spatial-temporal realities, the person can only experience God consciously in this-worldly categories (Rahner 1985:65). Making the unthematic experience thematic does not create for us our original relationship with God (Rahner 1989:98). It merely enables us to express it in spatio-temporal categories; although, in the thematised form of experiencing God, we talk about God, we form words about God, we work out ideas and we become conscious of the reality of God. This secondary relationship of thematic experience of God is rooted and sustained by the previous unthematic, transcendental relatedness of our whole intellectuality that tries to make sense of the incomprehensible Infinite (Rahner 1970:6). By thematising the experience, we make it as intelligible and comprehensible as it can become for us at that moment.

The direct nature of the thematic experience of God

It becomes clear that for Rahner, a direct thematic experience of God is that explicit, conceptual and thematic experience of God which is rooted in – and always points to – a more original, unthematic and unreflexive experience of God (Rahner 1989:52). The thematic experience is an expression of our transcendent orientation towards God and while the thematic experience of God is grounded in the unthematic experience of God, it is not the original and foundational mode of the transcendental experience of God (Rahner 1989:52).

The direct thematic experience of God is the direct expression of the original unthematic experience of God in our concrete historical realities. It is the visible embodiment and conscious experience of God (Dych 1992:79). This experience of God is directly present in our categorical world of space and time, and the directness of the experience is expressed as our worldly experiences, because God is experienced as a dimension of our spatio-temporal realities. The direct experience, as a concrete experience of God, is “a moment in and a modality of our transcendence and at the same time a historically mediated immediacy of God” (Rahner 1989:87). Every direct thematic experience of God can therefore be perceived as God’s presence becoming concrete in this world.

The direct nature of the thematic experience of God can be best understood in the light of Rahner’s theology of the symbol. A real symbol is one in which the reality of what is symbolised is really present and therefore can come to expression in the symbol. It is not like a sign that is only extrinsically or arbitrarily related to what it signifies. A real symbol has an intrinsic ontological relationship to what is symbolised so that it becomes present (Rahner 1966: 224 & 225). To illustrate this principle, he cites the relationship between the body and the soul: the human soul comes to expression in the body as its symbol and has no existence apart from its expression in the symbol (Rahner 1966:234). The symbol “is the self-realisation of a being in the other which is constitutive of its essence” (Rahner 1966:234). Body and soul are therefore one, but form is a differentiated unity of symbol and symbolised. The same symbolic ontology can be applied to the inner relationship between the thematic experiences and the unthematic experiences of God. Like the soul and the body, the two types of experiences of God form a differentiated unity as symbol and symbolised.

In the direct thematic experience of God, the original, unthematic experience comes to the surface. The thematic experience is derived from the non-conceptual experience of God in which the transcendence of God, which accompanies all our experiences, emerges into a conscious awareness. The individual transcends the self in the experience and has a sense of the immediacy of God by being in touch with the unthematic experience of God (Dych

1992:136). The spatio-temporal experience, whereby the thematic experience of God is mediated, seems to recede into the background. It becomes less significant and more transparent, and can disappear almost entirely when the God dimension assumes greater awareness. Mediation and immediacy in this context are not contradictory. Immediacy to God is the form of "mediated immediacy". The very self of God is present in the mediated experience (Rahner 1989:83). This immediacy allows God to be God; to be a God who does not give a mysterious gift that is different from "God-self", but who gives "God-self" in the gift (Rahner 1989:125). We are therefore directly aware of the reality of God in thematic form and although this is regarded as a secondary mode of the original unthematic relationship to God, the thematic experience is, as it were, the "real symbol" of the unthematic experience. As indicated before, it is the conscious embodiment of the unthematic experience of God (Rahner 1989:99).

Although Rahner does not say so, in the light of this, one can speak of degrees of directness – and the degree of the direct nature of the thematic experience will depend on the degree to which the person allows the original experience of God to surface. According to Rahner, the original experience of God is intrinsically part of human beings and it is the task of theology to assist people to bring the original unthematic experience of God to the surface – to an experience of a conscious awareness of God (Rahner 1989:16 & 17). Each person has to be taken back in thematic consciousness to the original unthematic experience of God. It is also the task of theology to find concepts and language that can objectify and express the unthematic experience in a concrete way so that the faith can stay alive. Rahner turns to the method that was developed by Ignatius Loyola to make the unthematic experience of God a direct thematic experience (Dych 1992:44).

Thoughts on Rahner's concept of experiencing God directly

The novelty of Rahner's elucidation of direct experience of God can be attributed to the fact that it forms part of humanity's transcendental dimension. Although Rahner provides the reader with an excellent theoretical presentation of direct experience of God, it would however be a misunderstanding to perceive his approach as exclusively theoretical. The practical implications are evident in his effort to do away with the division between doctrine and life and between theological system and religious experience.

While trying to reach an understanding of the complexity of Rahner's approach to direct experience of God can be a trying exercise, it is nevertheless significant that once the basic principles from which he operates are understood and his careful development of the concept is grasped, it is indeed possible to recognise how his system sustains various theological discourses concerning direct experience of God. Rahner not only makes an

indispensable theological and philosophical contribution to comprehending direct experience of God, he also makes human experience a criterion for understanding direct experience of God. His focus on human experience gave rise to his original theological-anthropological method, which provides crucial insight into perceiving direct experience of God as a necessary constituent of being human.

Despite the fact that Rahner’s presentation of direct experience of God can easily be perceived as the work of an idealistic theoretician, he does not deny the world. Direct experience of God is an integral part of life. In fact, it is human life. To experience God directly is to be involved in and with the world and humankind. Rahner does not tire of saying that God is not known and experienced as one object among other objects. He insists that God is experienced not just as a separate category of religious experience and is to be found not only in religious moments, but in all moments and “in all things”.

Since direct experience of God forms an integral part of the human being as mystery, Rahner regards it as imperative that all human beings should learn to interpret direct experiences of God. It can, however, be argued that not all people can necessarily perceive their own mystery. Although Rahner was convinced that deep down people are well aware of their own inner mystery, he was not insensitive towards the apparent “inability” of people to perceive their own inner mystery. This is evident in his constant concern with the difficulties of understanding God and believing in God in modern times. He is aware that science and technology’s control of the world means that people will find it increasingly difficult to encounter their own mystery. He argues that it is often only the practical circumstances of one’s life that confound the interpretation of direct experiences of God. If this is so, it would be useful if Rahner can suggest practical means to remove obstacles towards interpreting direct experiences of God. He also insists that direct experiences of God are always present even though there “appear” to be no visible proofs, other than reflection, to assist people in becoming aware of them. While Rahner presents reflection as the means that brings a person to the realisation of the God-dimension in a spatio-temporal experience, it is a fact that not every person can uncover the dense nature of spatio-temporal experiences. In view of this, some of us might have to settle for the possibility that a direct experience of God will remain an unrealised experience. However, the question still remains: In what sense is an unthematic experience of God an “experience” and in what sense is it a “direct” experience?

Rahner depicts direct experiences of God as both transcendental and unthematic. Although the unthematic and thematic experiences are inextricably intertwined, the thematic experience is considered an expression of the unthematic experience. However, the unthematic experience of God has an

autonomy of its own. The unthematic experience of God (as described by Rahner) is anonymous, indefinable and exists in a mode of otherness. In this sense, the experience can lack realisation, can remain nameless and can be easily overlooked. Again, the prevailing question is: In what sense can an unthematic experience of God be regarded as an experience and how direct is an unthematic experience of God? Does Rahner provide any positive reason to consider the unthematic experience of God as direct? Does Rahner account for the experiential quality of an unthematic experience or is it, as TS Eliot said in *The dry salvages*, possible to have the experience but miss the meaning?

Either Rahner uses the term very ambiguously or he stretches its meaning beyond the conventional understanding and uses it conveniently for want of a better word. If (as Rahner says) the unthematized forms of experience form part of another "mode" of experience, then one might have to be content with the idea that the nature of the experience will always remain unverifiable. One can argue that in the same way that one will never obtain a manipulative hold on the unthematic experience of God, one can never come to a satisfactory understanding of how an unthematic experience of God is an "experience". We can therefore conclude that our inability to discern unthematic experience of God is related to our lack of understanding unthematic experience. Although the word "experience" encompasses a broad spectrum of meaning, it can be argued that in experience one is confronted with something real and objective that exists independently of oneself, one's views and one's attitudes. An experience comprises a vivid moment of awareness and comprehension. If an unthematic experience is not a demonstrable experience, not palpable and not datable, in what sense does Rahner use the term "experience"?

If the direct nature of an unthematic experience of God is understood to be a constant state of being, there exists (as acknowledged by Rahner) an inherent danger that it can be taken for granted and will always lack realisation. Rahner also claims that the acknowledgement of the existence of direct experience forms part of a spiritual decision, which he describes as an honour and a responsibility of humanity since we possess free will. If this is so, a rational decision for God can obviously not be based on an unthematic experience of God since it is nameless and deeply buried in our daily activities. Viewed in this way, it seems that the directness of an unthematic experience of God is associated with the intrinsic nature of an unthematic experience of God and our ability or inability to appreciate the direct nature of the experience does not alter its reality. It can be argued that since the direct nature of the unthematic experience has to be mediated in some way, it is up to the thematic form of direct experience to provide insight into and recognition of the direct nature of the unthematic experience of God. However, one has to develop one's ability to discern direct experience of

God particularly as it is also an intrinsic dimension of an experience of something else in the empirical world.

Closing remarks

Perhaps the special genius of Rahner’s approach is that apart from providing deeper insight into the concept of direct experience of God, he teaches one to question and to search. Direct experience is obviously not just one moment in a person’s life; it is a living process that one has to reflect upon. Direct experience is never complete because there are thousands of direct experiences of God and the one primal experience underlies them all. Understood in this way, direct experience of God is inherent in specific, ordinary, everyday experiences. One can therefore never exhaust searching and reflecting on direct experiences of God.

I am quite certain my honours assignment did not come near to expressing the understanding I have since acquired of Rahner’s theology. Nevertheless, Simon Maimela acknowledged my effort with such high regard that it planted in me the seed for further exploration on this topic. For this, I am grateful.

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