

On listening? Listening (anew) to an 80-year-old

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Abstract

The article honours Denise Ackermann by seeking to understand why she named Karl Rahner as one of the theologians who influenced her own life and thought. Since the influence seems to flow from his Ignatian spirituality and practices of listening and discerning, the article attempts to understand the background, nature, and role of listening as spiritual practice in Rahner's life and work. In this process, the tension between transcendental and categorical thinking for him illuminates the tension between listening to her own feelings on the one hand and listening to the Man on the Borrowed Donkey on the other hand, manifest in her own life and work.

Keywords

Denise Ackermann; Karl Rahner; Ignatius of Loyola; hearing; listening

Listening to Ackermann on recording

The 80-year-old that the title refers to is actually Karl Rahner – but we start with Denise Ackermann.¹ In her delightful self-reflections during the Stellenbosch launch of *Surprised by the Man on the Borrowed Donkey*:

¹ This essay is an annotated version of a paper that was read in Denise Ackermann's honour during a Conference hosted by the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians at the School of Public Health, the University of the Western Cape, on 13 March 2015, to celebrate her 80th birthday early that April. The theme of the Conference organised by Juliana Claassens was "Surprised (anew) by the Mystery of Hope." This was a reference to her essay called "The Mystery of Hope: A Response to the Tragic," presented at a Conference in honour of John de Gruchy at Stellenbosch University on 4 September 2014 and was subsequently published in the *NGTT* 55, Supplementum 1, 2014, 1025–1034. The original title of this paper when delivered was therefore "Blessed are those with the Gift of Hearing? Listening (Anew) to an 80-Year-Old".

Ordinary Blessings she made two remarkable comments, amongst many others.² Both comments – as well as the potential tension between them – reminded me immediately of Rahner.

Towards the end of the recording of the event she explains how during the process of writing this book over the previous few years she “learnt the important lesson of stopping thinking while I was writing and *beginning to listen*.” The book, she says, is “a book from the heart” because she wanted “to connect theology to what I was feeling and *what I was hearing about what I was feeling*.”³

Hardly a minute later she says that the book is about the depth of meaning for her of the man on the borrowed donkey, since Jesus is “somebody who is a daily reality, somebody *who walks out of the Scriptures into our daily lives*, accompanies us and shows us the way.” The book, for her, is an account of her deepening experience of this man on the donkey, walking out of Scripture into our daily lives (all my italics).⁴

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- 2 Denise M. Ackermann, *Surprised by the Man on the Borrowed Donkey: Ordinary Blessings*, Cape Town: Lux Verbi, 2014. The book was officially launched at the Faculty of Theology, Stellenbosch University, on 4 September 2014, during a Conference celebrating John de Gruchy’s 75th birthday. She opens with a first chapter on what it means to be surprised and blessed. The rest of the book consists of seven chapters, each in the form of a contemporary beatitude – seven beatitudes of her own choice. It concludes with a brief section on birds. She develops seven such blessings, namely embracing contradiction, living into holiness, finding freedom, listening with discernment, being grateful, knowing when enough is enough, and being able to laugh. In discussing them, she actually deals at length with many other themes as well – hope, illness, silence, liturgical renewal, mystery, prayer, attentiveness. The whole book reads like one long conversation with the mystical tradition of contemplation – informed, intimate, insightful, and deeply honest. It draws on centuries of thought, writing, reading, and prayer, but it is not academic, it is deep, but not complicated. Notes at the end of each chapter are not numbered, but merely provide additional information for those who may be interested to pursue some ideas further.
 - 3 The video called “Surprised by the Man on the Borrowed Donkey – Denise Ackermann” is available at <http://www.sun.ac.za/english/faculty/theology/Pages/Video1.aspx>. The first comment is heard about 21:45 minutes into the video.
 - 4 The second comment is heard about 23:05 into the video. The motif of the “man of the borrowed donkey” has played a key role in her life and work for a long time. During a Conference on her Theology and Spirituality at the University of the Western Cape on 5 September 2008, she again referred to that in her response, later published as “Found Wanting and Left Untried?” – Confessions of a Ragbag Theologian,” in a *Festschrift* with the papers of that Conference, Miranda Pillay, Sarojini Nadar & Clint le Bruyns (eds.), *Ragbag Theologies. Essays in Honour of Demise M. Ackermann, A Feminist Theologian of Praxis* (Stellenbosch: EFSA, 2009), 267–282.

Anyone with knowledge of the mystical traditions in Christian history will immediately hear the possible tension and indeed remember many historical conflicts between these two claims – on the one hand listening and hearing what one is feeling and on the other hand experiencing Jesus walking out of the Scriptures into our daily lives.

Listening to Ackermann on Rahner

Anyone with knowledge of Rahner, perhaps the most influential Catholic theologian of the 20th century, will also immediately hear his own voice and his struggle to keep these two experiences together, as it were, hearing the “transcendental” and therefore existential divine word already given in our nature and our everyday realities on the one hand and on the other hand hearing the “categorical” and therefore the revealed and historical divine word in the Jesus of the Scriptures.⁵

In an interesting footnote in her autobiographical response to the essays in her *Festschrift, Confessions of a Ragbag Theologian*, Ackermann mentioned some male theologians who have been important sources for her theology, and Karl Rahner’s name is first on the list. Although she never explains why, neither there, nor anywhere else, it comes as no surprise.⁶

Like Ackermann, Rahner was intrigued by listening and hearing. She deals with this as one of the ordinary blessings in the moving chapter on “Blessed are those who listen with discernment, for they will hear ‘the sound of

5 See Dirk J. Smit, *Teologie as Antropologie? ‘n Kritiese Beoordeling van die Transendentiaal-Antropologiese Teologie van Karl Rahner*, Stellenbosch: Stellenbosch University, 1979, unpublished doctoral dissertation; also Dirk J. Smit, “Teologie as Antropologie?,” in Robert Vosloo (ed), *Remembering Theologians – Doing Theology. Collected Essays 5*, Dirk J. Smit (Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2013), 363–380.

6 “Found Wanting and Left Untried? – Confessions of a Ragbag Theologian,” 269. The rest of the names are Edward Schillebeeckx, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Gustavo Gutiérrez, Jürgen Moltmann, Duncan Forrester, Pat Miller, Miroslav Volf, Michael Welker, and Rowan Williams. For other feminist theologians who have been in dialogue with Karl Rahner, see e.g. the essay by Mary Steinmetz, “Thoughts on the Experience of God in the Theology of Karl Rahner: Gifts and Implications,” *Lumen et Vita* 2 (2012): 1–10, with a section on “Rahner’s contributions to feminist theology and spirituality” (referring amongst others to Mary Daly, Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Rosemary Ruether, Elizabeth Johnson, Catherine Mowry LaCugna and Nancy Pineda-Madrid).

sheer silence’.⁷ Already in her earlier work, however, notions of listening, hearing, discernment and of course silence had been present in important ways.⁸

Listening to the Word

Rahner began his academic career with an influential study called *Hörer des Wortes*, his ground-laying philosophy of religion in which he describes human beings as “hearers of the word.” This is what defines us and makes us human, we are made to hear the word, we are gifted with the ability to hear – the word.⁹

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- 7 “Blessed are those who listen with discernment, for they will hear ‘the sound of sheer silence,’” *Surprised by the Man on the Borrowed Donkey*, 177–208. She tells about her own experiences, since she had been diagnosed a few years earlier with macular degeneration and explains that “Sounds have become more acute, more filled with meaning. I listen more intently than before. I am slowly learning that seeing can make place for a new way of listening, that hearing the inner movements of the Spirit is a different way of ‘seeing’ and a new-found blessing.” In this listening, she says, she is finding new meaning for her life in the person of Jesus. “We are made to be listeners,” she says. The congregations of the early and medieval church were listening communities, she says. Today many people in different places in our world “gather as communities of pilgrim people who travel with our eyes on the man on the borrowed donkey,” she says. The reference to God who is in “a sound of sheer silence” comes from Kings 19:1–18, “I cannot know what this means save to say that it is an inexplicable event full of paradox and mystery; a different reality is ‘heard’ and obeyed.” She speaks about mystery, about longing, about pursuing an inner thirst, about unlearning, about deliberate acts of unlearning, about being prepared to be surprised. “We are made to listen,” she says, “Listening implies waiting, and an openness to surprise.” The preparation for listening to God is listening to others. In this context she comes to silence and solitude and to several historical figures as guides on this way into silence – including amongst others (like Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Desmond Tutu and Mother Teresa) also Ignatius of Loyola and Karl Rahner.
- 8 These themes were present in most of her work on spirituality over many years, for two representative essays, see e.g. her response to the process that led to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, “On Hearing and Lamenting: Faith and Truth-Telling,” in Russel Botman & Robin Petersen (eds), *To Remember and to Heal*, Cape Town: Human and Rousseau, 1996, 47–56; as well as her essay honouring Jaap Durand, “Metaphor, Mystery and Paradox: Orientations for Christian Spirituality,” in Ernst Conradie & Christo Lombard (eds), *Discerning God’s Justice in Church, Society and Academy* (Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2009), 25–36.
- 9 Karl Rahner, *Hearers of the Word* (New York: Herder, 1969); original German, *Hörer des Wortes*, 1941, based on 15 lectures from 1937; revised by Johann Baptist Metz and published again in 1963 in German, after which it became well-known. It was influenced by Martin Heidegger’s phenomenological ontology and argued that human beings by nature possess a *potentia oboedientialis*, making them potential hearers of God’s self-

The tension referred to earlier, is already present in the potential ambiguity of this description by Rahner, and very deliberately so. In his even earlier – controversial, initially unsuccessful, but later influential – attempt at a doctoral dissertation in philosophy, *Spirit in the World*, he had already laid the groundwork for this understanding of human nature.¹⁰

In short, God’s Spirit, God’s grace is always and already present – in human beings and in the world. Being human means that we are already graced, gifted, with the divine presence in us and in reality. For that reason human beings – all human beings, by being human – possess the possibility to hear the word, the transcendental word already in us. His whole life and work would remain determined by these fundamental convictions of his earliest work.¹¹

communication, through their nature and existence. It is possible for all humanity to listen to and receive God’s self-communication – and the fact that reality and life is in many ways experienced as absurd does not deny this potential, in fact, it affirms it, since it draws human beings to the holy mystery “which we call God” (an expression often repeated in Rahner’s thought and work).

- 10 For his doctoral dissertation he wrote a modern retrieval of Thomas Aquinas’s theory of knowledge, centered on the theme of openness to the spirit as ground of all human knowledge, thereby conceiving human existence fundamentally as “spirit in world.” When his doctoral adviser rejected the manuscript as insufficiently traditional (it was later published in 1939 as *Geist in Welt*), Rahner left Freiburg for Innsbruck, where he quickly completed a theological dissertation on the typological meaning of the blood from the side-wounds of Jesus according to John 19:34, in order to satisfy the academic demands. This study remained unpublished and untranslated and unknown. He later called it “a small, lousy, but at least according to the standards of the time, adequate theological dissertation,” see *Faith in a Wintry Season*, 16. In 1937 he began to teach dogmatic theology.
- 11 In a late interview Rahner did call these two early and influential philosophical works – *Spirit in the World and Hearers of the Word* – “rather lopsided works of my youth” and said that he does not simply want to be stereotyped by reference to them, in other words, only reading them will not yet provide one insight into the deepest nature of his theology and spirituality, “Grace at the Heart of Human Existence,” *Faith in a Wintry Season*, 22. To his mind, he discovered the same convictions in spirituality and theology, in what he called revelation theology, “You see, if God, from the very beginning dwells within the innermost core of my existence through what we call grace, God’s self-communication, and Holy Spirit, and if he comes to me not only from the outside, but from the very heart of my existence, then that is a revelation theology which so radically flows from the wellspring of the self that no more answers can be given, “Grace as the Heart of Human Existence,” *Faith in a Wintry Season*, 25.

Over many years he would develop the implications of these insights in an enormous variety of ways – in his widely popular spiritual writings;¹² in his mystical reflections on everyday realities and experiences;¹³ in his

12 See e.g. only Rahner, *Worte ins Schweigen* (Leipzig, 1938), tr. As *Encounters with Silence* (Westminster, 1960); *Von der Not und dem Segen des Gebetes*, (Innsbruck, 1949), tr. As *On Prayer*, (New York, 1958); *Gebete des Lebens* (Freiburg, 1984), tr. as *Prayers for a Lifetime* (New York: Crossroad, 1984).

For a sense of the spirituality found in these works, a very brief but well-known excerpt from *Encounters with Silence* may suffice, from the prayerful meditation “God of My Daily Routine,” “I should like to bring the routine of my daily life before You, O Lord, to discuss the long and tedious hours that are filled with everything else but You. Look at the routine, O God of Mildness. Look upon us human beings, who are practically nothing else but routine. In Your loving mercy, look at my soul ... doesn’t my soul look just like a marketplace where the second-hand dealers from all corners of the globe have assembled to sell the shabby riches of the world? ... O God, how the meaning of that lofty-sounding phrase “soul” has changed! How different it sounds to me now, when my soul has become a huge warehouse where day after day the trucks unload their crates without any plan or discrimination to be piled helter-skelter in every conceivable corner and cranny, until it is crammed full of top to bottom with the trite, the commonplace, the insignificant, the routine. What will become of me, dear God, if my life goes on like this? What will happen to me when all the crates are suddenly swept out of the warehouse? How will I feel at the hour of my death? Then there will be no more ‘daily routine’; then I shall suddenly be abandoned by all the things that now fill up my days here on earth. And what will I myself be at that hour, when I am only myself and nothing else? My whole life long I have been nothing but the ordinary routine, all business and activity, a desert filled with empty sound and meaningless fury. But when the heavy weight of death one day presses down upon my life and squeezes the true and lasting content out of all those many days and long years, what will be the final yield? May be at that last reckoning, at the time of the great disillusionment that will take the place of the great illusion of my tritely spent earthly life, may be then, O God, if you have been merciful to me, the genuine yield of my unguanine life will be only a few blessed moments, made luminous and living by Your grace. May be then I shall see the few precious instants when the grace of Your Love has succeeded in stealing into an obscure corner of my life, in between the countless bales of second-hand goods that fill up my everyday routine,” 53–55.

13 See e.g. only Rahner, *Alltägliche Dinge* (Einsiedeln, 1974); Rahner, *The Mystical Way in Everyday Life: Sermons, Prayers and Essays* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2010). Harvey Egan, translator and editor of many of Rahner’s spiritual works, explains this well in his “Translator’s Foreword,” *I Remember*, 4, “Much of Rahner’s theology may be called ‘mystical’ because it attempts to compress, to simplify, and to concentrate all Christian beliefs and practices by indicating how they evoke the experience of God’s loving self-communication to us in the crucified and risen Christ. Even the agnostic or atheist who loves in courageous fidelity to the demands of everyday life lives the ‘mysticism of daily life.’ For Rahner, moreover, ‘all life is a subject of theological reflection.’ Impelled by his ‘Ignatian mysticism of joy in the world’ and of ‘finding God in all things,’ Rahner’s theology also contains a movement of ‘unfolding’ the mystery of God’s suffering and victorious love for us in Christ into every dimension of human life. *Has any other contemporary theologian written a ‘theology of everyday things’ – a theology of work, of*

mystagogical introductions to faith, hope and love;¹⁴ in his so-called transcendental theological approach and methodology;¹⁵ in his existential expositions of the doctrines of the Church;¹⁶ in his contributions to the Church's official studies and teaching;¹⁷ in his editorial work and his own contributions to major series of dictionaries and encyclopaedias;¹⁸ in his introductory "foundations of the Christian faith";¹⁹ in his impressive set of "theological investigations," his essays and speeches published as *Schriften zur Theologie*;²⁰ in the far more than 4000 titles of his official bibliography.²¹

getting about, sitting down, seeing, laughing, eating, sleeping, and the like? Nothing here below is profane for those who know how to see" (my italics).

- 14 See e.g. only Rahner, "Glaube als Mut," *Schriften zur Theologie XIII*, 252–268; "Zur Theologie der Hoffnung," *Schriften zur Theologie VIII*, 561–579; *Chancen des Glaubens* (Freiburg, 1971); instructive e.g. is Rahner, *The Love of Jesus and the Love of Neighbour* (New York: Crossroad, 1983).
- 15 See e.g. only Rahner, "Transzendenzenerfahrung aus katholisch-dogmatischer Sicht," *Schriften zur Theologie XIII*, 207–225; *Auch heute weht der Geist*, München, 1971; *Meditations on Freedom and the Spirit*, London, 1977.
- 16 In addition to the many essays in his collected works in which he gives existential expositions of traditional doctrines, see e.g. also his monographs on crucial and controversial issues of doctrine, church law and life in the important series *Questiones Disputatae*, like Rahner, *Christologie – systematisch und exegetisch, Das Dymanische in der Kirche, Das Problem der Hominisation, Episkopat und Primat, Kirche und Sakrament, Offenbarung und Überlieferung, Über die Schriftinspiration, Visionen und Prophezeiungen, Was ist Häresie?*, and *Zur Theologie des Todes*.
- 17 See e.g. his crucially important contributions to the comprehensive work after the Second Vatican Council called *Mysterium Salutis* (Einsiedeln, 1967).
- 18 See e.g. his editorial work and his multiple own contributions in works like *Herders Theologisches Taschenlexikon, Handbuch für Patoraltheologie, Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche, Kleines Konzilskompendium*, and the *Kleines Theologisches Wörterbuch*.
- 19 See Rahner, *Grundkurs des Glaubens: Einführung in den Begriff des Christentums* (Freiburg, 1976), tr. As *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1978).
- 20 See Rahner, *Schriften zur Theologie*, 16 Volumes (Einsiedeln & Zurich, 1954–1984), tr. and published in English as *Theological Investigations*, 23 Volumes (New York: Crossroad, since 1961).
- 21 For a bibliography of his own work, see Roman Bleistein & Elmar Klinger, *Bibliographie Karl Rahner (1924–1969)* (Freiburg, 1969), supplemented in Roman Bleistein, *Bibliographie Karl Rahner (1969–1974)*, supplemented again in Paul Imhof & Heinrich Treziak, "Bibliographie Karl Rahner 1974–1979," in Herbert Vorgrimler (Hrsg.), *Wagnis Theologie* (Freiburg, 1979), 579–598, and yet again in Paul Imhof & Elisabeth Meuser, "Bibliographie Karl Rahner 1979–1984" in Elmar Klinger and Klaus Wittelstadt (Hrsg.), *Glaube im Prozess* (Freiburg, 1984), 854–871. The secondary literature on Rahner, both popular and academic, is immense.

He only refused to write an autobiography or his memoirs – his life and work was not important or interesting enough, he said.²²

Listening to interviews

He also reflected on these insights and their implications in many fascinating interviews over the years, including 23 interviews just in the last months before his 80th birthday and his death. Many of these interviews were published in English in three collections, called *I Remember* (1985), *Karl Rahner in Dialogue* (1986, with 65 interviews) and *Faith in a Wintry Season* (1990, with the long list of interviews from his last two years). It is primarily to his own voice in all these conversations, including the late interviews with the 80-year-old Rahner, that we are invited to listen.²³

Already on the occasion of his 70th anniversary, Rahner gave an interview called “Grace as the Heart of Human Existence.” Behind everything he had done, he explained, “there stands an immediate pastoral and spiritual interest.”²⁴ This whole interview is one long, extended and carefully argued exposition of what he calls “my basic theological conviction, if you will,” namely that grace is not extrinsic, coming from the outside, in the way that

22 See “Translation Editor’s Preface,” in Karl Rahner, *Faith in a Wintry Season* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 1–3. However, he also often quoted with approval his student Johann Baptist Metz who said of Rahner that for him biography and theology was the same, so that he could also have thought that all his published work was his life, so that no further autobiographical account was necessary.

23 Karl Rahner, *I Remember. An Autobiographical Interview with Meinold Krauss* (New York: Crossroad, 1985) (tr. by Harvey Egan, from *Erinnerungen im Gespräch mit Meinold Krauss*, Freiburg: Herder, 1984); Karl Rahner, *Karl Rahner in Dialogue. Conversations and Interviews 1965–1982* (New York: Crossroad, 1986) (tr. by Harvey Egan, edited by Paul Imhof & Hubert Biallowons, from *Karl Rahner im Gespräch, Band I: 1964–1977* (München: Kösel Verlag, 1982), and *Karl Rahner im Gespräch, Band II: 1978–1982* (München: Kösel Verlag, 1983)); Karl Rahner, *Faith in a Wintry Season. Conversations and Interviews with Karl Rahner in the Last Years of his Life* (New York: Crossroad, 1990) (tr. by Harvey Egan, edited by Paul Imhof & Hubert Biallowons, from *Glaube in winterlicher Zeit: Gespräche mit Karl Rahner aus den letzten Lebensjahren*, Düsseldorf: Patmos Verlag, 1986). Together, these many conversations and interviews present a fascinating and intriguing picture of his deepest convictions and most personal development and transformations.

24 Karl Rahner, “Grace as the Heart of Human Existence,” *Faith in a Wintry Season*, 18. This wide-ranging and important interview was originally given with and published by the journal *Herder Korrespondenz* in 1974 on the occasion of his seventieth birthday, and later translated and included in *Faith in a Wintry Season*, 13–38.

so many people think, but rather intrinsic, always already given, already present, already at work, in short, transcendental.²⁵

Listening to silence

His first and last publications, like many others over the years, were devotional works, dealing with prayer, spiritual life and human experience. The press published his early philosophical work without any subsidy from him, he later said, because his little booklet *Encounters with Silence* was already printed and popular at the time, and fittingly, his last published work was *Prayers for a Lifetime* (1984).²⁶

For good reason, he was called both Doctor Mysticus, the Doctor of twentieth-century Mystical Theology, and Doctor Orationis, the Doctor of Prayer for the twentieth century.²⁷ For him these devotional works were “not secondary by-products” but “at least as important as my specifically theological works.” “I believe that in some chapters of *On Prayer* there is at least as much theology tucked in – painstaking, thoughtful theology – as in my so-called scholarly or scientific works,” he said.²⁸

25 “What I mean is this. At least at one time, grace, assisting grace, and the outward circumstances shaped by God’s grace in human life were conceived extrinsically, as discrete realities that occurred now and then, and which could be lacking completely in the sinner or the unbeliever. My basic theological conviction, if you will, is in opposition to this. What we call grace is obviously a reality which is God-given, unmerited, free, dialogical, – in other words – supernatural. But for me grace is at the same time a reality which is so very much part of the innermost core of human existence in decision and freedom, always and above all given in the form of an offer that is either accepted or rejected, that the human being cannot step out of this transcendental peculiarity of his being at all. From this conviction then, first of all, arose what I call ‘anonymous Christianity’ and the fact that I consider no religion – it’s immaterial which one – ungraced, although this grace may be suppressed, or expressed in a depraved way. From here also developed what I have called the transcendental moment of historical revelation,” Rahner, “Grace as the Heart of Human Existence,” *Faith in a Wintry Season*, 21.

26 Karl Rahner, *Prayers for a Lifetime* (New York: Crossroad, 1985), edited by Albert Raffelt and with an introduction by Karl Lehmann.

27 See e.g. “Translator’s Foreword,” in *I Remember*, 3; also Harvey Egan, “Karl Rahner: Theologian of the Spiritual Exercises,” *Thought* 67, 1992, 261.

28 Rahner, “Grace as the Heart of Human Existence,” *Faith in a Wintry Season*, 19.

In fact, he would later point out that his so-called scholarly or scientific works were after all not really theological themselves, but also pastoral and spiritual.²⁹ His only seemingly theological monograph, for example, his class lectures published as *Foundations of the Christian Faith*, were very deliberately nothing else than mystagogical – one of his favourite terms – introductions to the experiential dimensions and implications of the faith of the church. Mystagogy is the leading of all people into their own deepest mystery by awakening, deepening, and explicating to them what they are already living, probably without knowing or understanding what they are doing.³⁰

Listening to Ignatius

For him, this pastoral and spiritual work was born in his indebtedness to Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuit Order. He joined the Order very early. He described the spirituality of Ignatius as the most important influence in his life and work, more important than any philosophy or theology. For many years he offered courses in the *Spiritual Exercises*.³¹

29 See many of his autobiographical conversations and interviews for this theme, e.g. “Deciding to Become a Theologian,” in *I Remember*, 22.

30 Asked for a brief explanation of the purpose and theme of his *Foundations of Christian Faith*, Rahner responded, “I really only want to tell the reader something very simple. Human persons in every age, always and everywhere, whether they realize it and reflect upon it or not, are in relationship with the unutterable mystery of human life that we call God. Looking at Jesus Christ the crucified and risen one, we can have the hope that now in our present lives, and finally after death, we will meet God as our own fulfilment,” Rahner, “What is Christianity?” in *Karl Rahner in Dialogue*, 147. Explaining “mystagogical,” he said, “By mystagogical I mean bringing the *fides quae* or what we believe into the closest possible unity with the *fides qua* or the act of faith itself, and thus showing what the tenets of faith actually mean for the individual and for society,” Rahner, “The Church’s Responsibility for the World,” in *Karl Rahner in Dialogue*, 49. On occasion, Rahner would distinguish between “a catechism of the heart” and “a catechism of the book,” as another way to name the same tension between transcendental and categorical (or historical).

31 Rahner, “Grace as the Heart of Human Existence,” *Faith in a Wintry Season*, 19. He speaks about this again and again during the conversations and interviews, in addition to his many “theological investigations,” it is abundantly clear how crucially important this tradition and also in particular the *Spiritual Exercises* were for his own life, faith and work. See also Rahner, “Ignatian Mysticism of Joy in the World,” in Geoffrey B. Kelly (ed), *Karl Rahner. Theologian of the Graced Search for Meaning* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 80–94; as well as Rahner, “The Logic of Concrete Individual Knowledge in Ignatius of Loyola,” *The Dynamic Element in the Church* (New York: Herder, 1964),

Towards the end of his life he even wrote a letter to the Jesuit Order in the name of Ignatius himself, “Ignatius of Loyola Speaks to a Modern Jesuit”³² – and shortly before his death he would describe this letter as his “sort of last will and testament.”³³ He only later became conscious, he said, reading the letter again, that it is “much more a resumé of my theology, in general, and of how I tried to live.”³⁴

In this letter his central claim is that Ignatius made a personal and direct, immediate, experience of Godself – and that this experience is available to everyone.³⁵ In fact, he claims that his mysticism gave him an experience of God and an assuredness of faith that would also remain intact if there had been no Holy Scriptures at all. Why this unmediated encounter and experience of God does not do away with a relationship with Jesus and therefore also with the church is indeed a question, which he attempts to answer, but the primary fact is that he encountered God, that he experienced Godself.³⁶

84–170. When asked during the interview on his eightieth birthday about the persons or historical figures who had in his opinion most influenced his work, he responded, “As regards philosophy I’d like to mention Joseph Maréchal, S.J., and Martin Heidegger. With regard to spirituality, without a doubt, Ignatius of Loyola,” “The High Point of an Eighty-Year-Old Theologian’s Life,” *Faith in a Wintry Season*, 39.

- 32 For the original text of this fascinating letter, see Rahner, “Rede des Ignatius von Loyola an einen Jesuiten von heute,” in Karl Rahner, Paul Imhof & Helmuth Nils Loose, *Ignatius von Loyola* (Freiburg: Herder, 1978), 10–38.
- 33 Rahner, “Contemporary Christian Life,” in *Faith in a Wintry Season*, 104.
- 34 Rahner, “Contemporary Christian Life,” in *Faith in a Wintry Season*, 104.
- 35 Claiming to speak in the name of Ignatius, Rahner writes, “Ich war überzeugt, daß ich ... unmittelbar Gott begegnet bin und solche Erfahrung ändern, so gut es geht, vermitteln sollte ... Ich sage nur: ich habe Gott erfahren, den namenlosen und unergründlichen, schweigenden und doch nahen, in der Dreifaltigkeit seiner Zuwendung zu mir. Ich habe Gott erfahren auch und vor allem jenseits aller bildhaften Imagination ... Gott selbst. Gott selbst habe ich erfahren, nicht menschliche Worte über ihn ... Ich sage: so war es; ja, ich würde sagen: wenn ihr euren von einem untergründigen Atheismus gehetzten Skeptizismus über eine solche Behauptung bis zum äußersten, und zwar nicht nur in gescheit redender Theorie, sondern auch in der Bitterkeit des Lebens, kommen laßt, dann könnt ihr dieselbe Erfahrung machen,” in “Rede des Ignatius von Loyola an einen Jesuiten von heute,” 11–12.
- 36 “Seid ihr eigentlich nie darüber erschrocken, daß ich in meinem Bericht des Pilgers sagte, meine Mystik habe mir eine solche Gewißheit des Glaubens gegeben, daß er auch unerschüttert bliebe, wenn es keine Heilige Schrift gäbe? Wäre es da nicht leicht, die Anklage auf einen subjektivistischen Mystizismus und auf Unkirchlichkeit zu erheben? Mir war es eigentlich gar nicht so verwunderlich, daß man in Alcalá, Salamanca und anderswo mich verdächtige, ein Alumbrado zu sein. Ich bin Gott, den wahren und

This encounter is indeed by grace, but that does not mean that it is not available to everybody, on the contrary. This experience is after all not the result of teaching human beings something that was not already present within them, but rather the free acceptance of what is always already part of them and present within them, although often suppressed, which is called grace, or the immediacy of Godself.³⁷

Of course many people need some help in order to become aware of grace – or God – already within them, today perhaps more than ever, he writes, and for that purpose Jesuits have the *Spiritual Exercises* and for that purpose also Jesus is important, since in the crucified and resurrected Jesus and in following this poor and humble Jesus we encounter this God who loves us and affirms us and moves us also to love and affirm others and the world.³⁸

lebendigen, dem, der diesen alle Namen auslöschenden Namen verdient, wirklich begegnet. Ob man solche Erfahrung Mystik nennt oder anders, das ist hier gleichgültig ... *Warum solche Unmittelbarkeit ein Verhältnis zu Jesus und davon abgeleitet zur Kirche nicht aufhebt, davon will ich später noch ein wenig sprechen.* Zunächst aber: ich habe Gott begegnet; ich habe ihn selbst erfahren" (my italics), in "Rede des Ignatius von Loyola an einen Jesuiten von heute," 11. Later in the letter he does indeed attempt to address the question why Jesus and the Church are still relevant, in spite of this unmediated experience of God which is available to everyone, but he explicitly wants to affirm that this wordless experience came first – in fact, *before* he studied theology, before everything else. It is after all *this* experience which becomes the basis and criterion for his advice to contemporary theology, pastoral practice, church leadership and social involvement.

- 37 "Diese Erfahrung ist zwar Gnade, darum aber doch niemandem grundsätzlich verwehrt. Eben davon bin ich überzeugt. Ich hielt die Gnade von Manresa und in meinem folgenden Leben bis in die Einsamkeit meines Todes ganz allein doch nicht für ein besonderes Privileg eines elitär erwählten Menschen. Und darum gab ich Exerzitien, wem immer solches Angebot geistlicher Hilfe annehmbar zu sein schien ... Es bleibt dabei: Gott kann und will mit seinem Geschöpf unmittelbar handeln; daß es geschieht, kann der Mensch wirklich erfahren," in "Rede des Ignatius von Loyola an einen Jesuiten von heute," 12.
- 38 "Jetzt aber muß ich sprechen von Jesus. Hörte sich, was ich bisher sagte, an, als ob ich Jesus und seinen gebenedeiten Namen vergessen hätte? Ich habe ihn nicht vergessen, er war in all dem, was ich bisher sagte, inwendig schon anwesend ... Für mich in meinen Tagen war es kein Problem, in Jesus Gott zu finden und in Gott Jesus ... Für mich war seit meiner Bekehrung Jesus die Neigung Gottes schlechthin zur Welt und zu mir, *die* Neigung, in der die Unbegreiflichkeit des reinen Geheimnisses ganz da ist und der Mensch zu seiner eigenen Fülle kommt ... Es gibt kein Christentum, das an Jesus vorbei den unbegreiflichen Gott finden könnte ... Diesen Jesus dachte ich, diesen Jesus liebte ich, diesem Jesus suchte ich nachzufolgen ... *Ich weiß, daß ich damit das Geheimnis der Einheit von Geschichte und Gott nicht erklärt habe.* Aber in Jesus, dem Gekreuzigten und Auferstandenen, also dem Gott Lassenden und Gott Empfangenden, ist diese Einheit endgültig da und kann angenommen werden in Glauben, Hoffnung und Liebe"

Listening anonymously

Looking back at his own career, he admitted that Christology became increasingly important to him over the years, and in his Christology itself he increasingly changed – probably also in response to widespread criticism – from a speculative and transcendental Christology to a Christology of ascending, as he called it, beginning with Jesus, although he remained convinced that the presence of the transcendental Christ within all of humanity remains the basis and presupposition on which we can recognize the Jesus of history.³⁹

For Rahner, his well-known views on so-called anonymous faith and anonymous Christians – his conviction that anyone can be saved, also outside of the church and without their own understanding that they may actually be responding to Godself through their lives of faith, hope and

(only the last italics mine), in “Rede des Ignatius von Loyola an einen Jesuiten von heute,” 18–20.

39 He repeatedly discusses the relationship between transcendental and historical, also because he was often asked about it and even criticized because of it. This included the question whether he changed his mind about this and whether any such shift could for example be discerned in his Christological approaches over the decades. For example, “I think the question of whether there has been a shift in my Christology is a fair one. However, I can’t address it because I don’t really know whether or not I have moved in recent years from a descending Christology, as I call it, more and more toward an unpretentious, prudent, less speculative ascending Christology. I would say this, however: my earlier statement that God became human and world – which of course is also correct today – is, in a metaphysically dynamic framework, a more original and almost self-evident statement. Now, however, I would prefer to say that in Jesus, the Crucified and Risen One, I know whereof I live and die. Of course a metaphysical Christology still retains its validity. It’s not by turning to a simple human encounter with Jesus, with the concrete elements of his life, death, and resurrection, that I then come to believe that God *himself* is my future and the forgiveness of my guilt. I am thoroughly committed to the transcendental validity of the ‘Christ idea’. But I am convinced that one only comes to this transcendental idea in the encounter with concrete history ... Moving out from the concrete historical encounter I can then ask metaphysical questions. I must then show that this concrete historicity (i.e., history that is called Jesus) has an inner relationship to a primordial, if you will, transcendental constitutive element of humanity. It is in this sense that I understand the concept of the Christ idea and hold to it firmly,” “Grace as the Heart of Human Existence,” *Faith in a Wintry Season*, 29.

Elsewhere he comments that “Historicity and transcendentality are the most difficult to understand of all the fundamental structures of human existence. They cannot be reduced to a single such structure, and they mutually condition one another,” “Approaches to Theological Thinking,” in *Karl Rahner in Dialogue*, 132.

love – is simply an integral part of this Ignatian tradition.⁴⁰ In his opinion, the most significant achievement of the Second Vatican Council was precisely its optimistic view towards salvation, its implicit recognition of anonymous Christianity.⁴¹

Over the years Rahner often repeated during interviews that the Christian of the future will be a mystic or will not exist. By this he meant that individuals would have to make their own ultimate, immediate encounters with Godself in this Ignatian sense, even and perhaps particularly outside of the church and its institutional structures and practices.⁴²

Listening for God's sake

In many ways and in many works, over many years, Rahner worked out many concrete, everyday implications of this Ignatian spirituality – in the deep respect for mystery; in the transparency of the ordinary detail of

40 These convictions were extremely central to his life and thought and he often discussed and explained them in his conversations and interviews, in addition to the many papers and essays in which he developed and defended them, see e.g. “You see, what (anonymous Christianity) means is terribly simple and straightforward. Whether one should use the label ‘anonymous Christianity’ or not is something one can argue about. What is meant is that someone who follows his own conscience, whether he thinks he should be a Christian or not, whether he thinks he should be an atheist or not, is accepted before God and by God, and can reach that eternal life we confess in our Christian faith as the goal of all. In other words, grace and justification, relationship and union with God, and the possibility of attaining eternal life are only limited by a person’s bad conscience. And that is in fact what the term ‘anonymous Christianity’ tries to say,” Rahner, “Theology in Dialogue with the Contemporary World,” in *I Remember*, 77–78.

41 “Translator’s Foreword,” in *I Remember*, 3; also, e.g. “I would like to say, in answer to your question, something which I’ve never expressly said before. Without doubt, during the 1950s and 1960s right up to the Second Vatican Council, we represented and lived an optimism that has only partially been fulfilled in the developments of the last decades. So the Council’s decree *Gaudium et Spes* can be blamed, despite all that is right in it, for underestimating sin, the social consequences of human guilt, the horrible possibilities of running into historical dead ends, and so on. If we theologians, despite all this, hope for universal salvation, then it is because this optimism belongs precisely to the absurdity of the cross, to which we are bound as messengers of hope in God over against the hopelessness of humankind,” in “In Dialogue with Atheists,” *Faith in a Wintry Season*, 125

42 He repeatedly spoke in this way about the future of the church, see e.g. “The Immediate Experience of God in the *Spiritual Exercises* of Saint Ignatius of Loyola,” in *Karl Rahner in Dialogue*, 176; “Following Christ Today,” in *Karl Rahner in Dialogue*, 183.

everyday life; in “finding God in all things”; in the practice of “indifference in the Ignatian sense”; in the importance of silence and the reverence for darkness; in the unity between love of God and love of others; in the calling of the church as sacrament of the world’s salvation; in love of the world; in the nature and role of discernment; in the liberating possibilities of risk and daring; in the many active and often wordless self-transcending affirmations of faith, hope, and love; in the mystagogical purpose of theological studies, so that theological scholars should also be “spiritual teachers.”⁴³

Based on this spirituality of finding God in all things and “God for God’s own sake” he reacted vehemently against what he regarded as the new heresy of his time “and the most dangerous heresy of all,” namely the longing to use God in whichever ways as source for human happiness, “so-called self-realization,” well-being and success, as guarantee of whichever human ideals, projects, and programs, whether political, cultural, ideological, or economic. Even when he strongly supported many initiatives of justice, liberation, and progress, he remained deeply critical of all attempts to motivate them in the name of this new heresy and to reduce the mystery of God to human endeavours in history. He calls this “the greatest profanity and shamelessness towards God.”⁴⁴

43 See e.g. Rahner, “The Immediate Experience of God in the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius of Loyola,” in *Karl Rahner in Dialogue*, 174–181; see also about his personal experience, “Entrance into the Society of Jesus,” in *I Remember*, 35–39. “Rahner resolutely refused to divorce theology and spirituality into separate disciplines because of his conviction that one cannot exist without the other,” Harvey Egan, “Theology and Spirituality,” in Declan Marmion & Mary Hines (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Rahner* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2007), 14. Some of the most fascinating discussions in his conversations and interviews deal with the way in which he understands the task of the theologian – both his own, and that of other theologians, about whom he often sounds remarkably concerned and critical; see e.g. the moving autobiographical interview from the last days of his life, “Preacher of the Gospel,” *Faith in a Wintry Season*, 9–12, as well as his conversation on the introduction into spirituality during theological studies, “Grace as the Heart of Human Existence,” *Faith in a Wintry Season*, 31–34.

44 Rahner, “The Importance of Thomas Aquinas, in *Faith in a Wintry Season*, 50. He often wrote and spoke about heresies and new heresies and dangerous heresies, see e.g. Rahner, “A New Form of Heresy,” in Rahner, *Nature and Grace and Other Essays* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1963), 112–131.

“I once lectured in Salzburg on ‘the uselessness of transcendence.’ I stressed that God is not there for us, but that we are there for him and that we are real Christians only when we let ourselves fall, in surrender and without condition, into the incomprehensibility of God along with Jesus the Crucified. All this modern chatter about self-realization and even the enlisting of the good God in politics, the Third World, and the like are from the devil! Of course we must do more for the Third World. And we must take a critical stance toward our Western bourgeois society. I have nothing against liberation theology or political theology. But ... I was present in Frankfurt when Cardinal explained that the kingdom of God had begun in Nicaragua ... I won’t have anything to do with such nonsense! We must not overlook the danger that the modern period leans toward the heresy I mentioned of allowing God only to play the role of a stopgap for those cases in which human beings can no longer manage alone. I will have nothing to do with such a pseudo-humanistic and horizontal theology.”⁴⁵

Listening during winter

He was always deeply aware and seemingly became increasingly aware during his later years of the widespread atheism in the world he knew, even in the church. He experienced a close affinity between the way he understood being a believer and the so-called atheism of many. For him, many atheists were somehow only believers who thought they were atheists – and often with very good reason.⁴⁶

45 Rahner, “The Importance of Thomas Aquinas,” in *Faith in a Wintry Season*, 51.

46 Again and again he returned to the nature and role of atheism, e.g. “It is almost banal to have to say that in the depths of our being we all are other than we interpret ourselves to be. Consequently, it is nothing special at all if I add that there are very many people who think that they are atheists, based on the reflexive interpretation of their own person, but who, in the really existential decisions of their lives, actually affirm what we Christians call ‘God,’ and our relatedness to him. To put in concretely: when someone, in an absolute, selfless way goes against his or her own egoism in making an ultimate decision and chooses that which is good and true and just, then that person – whether he or she knows it or not – has affirmed the existence of God. So it is simply obvious to me that there are people who consider themselves to be atheists but who, in the concrete living of their lives, actualize an ultimate, unreflected, and, to a certain extent, wordless affirmation of God. For me it is a foregone conclusion that I, as a Christian, a Catholic, and a priest, must desire and work toward achieving that what these so-called atheists realize in their lives will also become clear in their reflexive, verbalized consciousness. But before these human beings have achieved that, they can, in the

“I said clearly that Christianity, with its affirmation of the unknown God, is in fact the most radical form of agnosticism. By comparison, much of what is supposed to be agnosticism is just idle talk since it doesn’t take seriously enough the incomprehensibility of our existence.”⁴⁷

His last conversations and interviews before his 80th birthday were published in English as *Faith in a Wintry Season*. It was these interviews that inspired the North American Lutheran historian Martin Marty to write his moving thoughts called *A Cry of Absence. Reflections for the Winter of the Heart*.⁴⁸

Rahner used this expression to describe the nature of the times and the church of the future. There will probably be “basically two fundamental types of spirituality and piety” in the church in future, he said, in response to a question, an enthusiastic and charismatic type with “an almost naive immediacy to God, bordering on a naive faith in the power of the Holy Spirit” and “a wintry spirituality ... closely allied with the torment of atheists.” He hoped that the pastoral theology and care of the church will not be confined only to the first type, but also “earnestly deal with the demands of the wintry spirituality as well ... (of) those ... who are going through the purgatory and hell of modern rationalism ... those people of a willing but troubled faith.”⁴⁹

ultimate, fundamental decisions of their lives already be what I, poor sinner, hope to be,” Rahner, “In Dialogue with Atheists,” *Faith in a Wintry Season*, 127.

- 47 Rahner, “A ‘Wintry’ Church and the Opportunities for Christianity,” in *Faith in a Wintry Season*, 199.
- 48 Martin Marty, *A Cry of Absence. Reflections for the Winter of the Heart* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983). Marty used some Biblical psalms to argue that precisely in seasons of experiences of God’s remoteness and absence there may be possibilities for new experiences with God.
- 49 Already in the well-known 1974 interview, “Grace as the Heart of Human Existence” (when asked about his book *The Shape of the Church to Come* (London: Seabury Press, 1975) in English translation), he referred to the wintry spirituality, “I think that in future there will be basically two fundamental types of spirituality and piety ... The one type, though decidedly Christian, and though those who practice it pray and receive the sacraments, is what I have called a wintry spirituality. It is closely allied with the torment of atheists, though obviously people who practice it are not atheists. The other type is found among the newer enthusiastic or charismatic movements, such as Catholic Pentecostalism. In this type of spirituality, there is an almost naive immediacy to God, bordering on a naive faith in the power of the Holy Spirit. Whether it is completely correct or not, well, it remains to be seen. Most likely both types will endure. I might say, though, that pastoral theology and strategies of pastoral care should not be confined only to the second, enthusiastic-charismatic type. In its preaching and conduct the

For him, even this “wintry piety” should also be taken as an experience of grace. “We have to take our own scepticism as an experience of grace, up to a point. We live in a sober era, and in that sense a wintry time, when in religious life there are not all too many blossoms about which one could wax enthusiastic. But I think even a wintry time can be a time of grace. Will we die, sick with cancer on our deathbed, with a charismatic enthusiasm, or painfully and nonetheless hoping beyond all hope, ‘Lord into thy hands I commend my spirit’? If the second is the style of our dying, then I think there is also a legitimately analogous way of living, also a life of grace, for grace can also be the sober hope against all hope.”⁵⁰

He often spoke about hope – in many ways and in many contexts. For him, a key question during all his years was whether life – and death – is absurd, or not. In the face of this fundamental and deeply existential question, he affirmed hope.⁵¹ When asked at eighty about the high point of his life, he answered “The real high point of my life is still to come. I mean that abyss of the mystery of God, into which one lets oneself fall in complete confidence of being caught up in God’s love and mercy forever.”⁵²

Church must earnestly deal with the demands of wintry spirituality as well. Those who belong to this type are above all those Christians who are going through the purgatory and hell of modern rationalism ... (T)he Church must, more than it has to this point, consider how well it addresses these people of a willing but troubled faith,” *Faith in a Wintry Season*, 35. In the 1984 interview, when he was eighty, he then repeated this claim, “In general, we are living through a ‘wintry season,’ as I have often said,” in “The High Point of an Eighty-Year-Old Theologian’s Life,” *Faith in a Wintry Season*, 39.

- 50 Rahner, “Spirituality Requires a Certain Educated Ignorance,” in *Karl Rahner in Dialogue. Conversations and Interviews 1965–1982*, 297.
- 51 He contemplated on hope continuously throughout his life, in scholarly and spiritual work. When asked during the interview after his eightieth birthday whether he has any final question for himself, he answered, “Ask myself a question, here and now? Well, I have a question, and I wish I knew the answer to it as well: What can I hope for? I can only say, for God’s light, eternity, and mercy. And I hope to be able to pray along with Teresa of Avila: ‘Let nothing disturb you ... God alone suffices,’ and with Ignatius of Loyola, ‘Take, Lord, and receive ..., give me only your love and your grace; that is enough for me.’ Both these prayers are more than just words; they embody a whole way of life,” Rahner, “The High Point of an Eighty-Year-Old Theologian’s Life,” *Faith in a Wintry Season*, 40.
- 52 Rahner, “The High Point of an Eighty-Year-Old Theologian’s Life,” *Faith in a Wintry Season*, 38.

Listening to Rahner in Ackermann

It is not necessary to explain how Denise Ackermann also faced many of these issues in her own life and work or to speculate why Karl Rahner was the first name in the list of male theologians whom she acknowledged. One could for example only read her late essay called “The Mystery of Hope: A Response to the Tragic,” in honour of John de Gruchy.⁵³

53 She was in fact directly influenced and even deeply formed by the spirituality of Ignatius, the Jesuit tradition, and the *Spiritual Exercises* – by her own biography and spiritual advisors, by retreats and spiritual disciplines, by persona experience. In this process, many of the themes that fascinated Rahner also fascinated her and became prominent in her own work, although often pursued in different ways, with different interlocutors, and with different emphases – one may think of her passion for the study of spirituality and for the central place of spirituality in the teaching of theology; of her interest in prayer and worship; of her understanding of God’s universal and inclusive love and grace; of her reluctance to see theology as public theology (in his case a reluctance to do political theology); of her concern for public responsibility and the kind of “realistic humanism” which he regarded as crucially important to prevent world catastrophes; of her deep awareness of the wintry side of life and faith, in her case often expressed in the language of lament; of her sensitivity to mystery and to questions and practices of discernment; of her affirmation of absurdity, contradiction, paradox, and incongruity; of both her loyalty to and her critical stance within the church and her deep concern about the role of leadership figures in the church; of her appreciation for the suffering and servant role of a courageous church following the Man on the Borrowed Donkey; and indeed of many other themes and questions.

For very insightful ways in which she describes her own spiritual journey, including “a life-changing privilege” of attending a thirty-day retreat at a Jesuit Center based on the *Spiritual Exercises*, see Ackermann, *After the Locusts. Letters from a Landscape of Faith* (Cape Town: David Philip, 2003), 129–175, and especially *Ragbag Theologies*, 267–284, including a discussion of the role of Ignatius and of the importance for her of his two central concepts of consolation and desolation.

The purpose of this short contribution was not to pursue these similarities (or any differences), but simply to draw attention to the importance of this tradition and these questions in the background of her life and work, to illustrate this by pointing to this seeming tension (in both Rahner and Ackermann, and in fact already in Ignatius) between “transcendental” and “categorical,” between metaphysical and historical, between experiences of everyday reality and mystery and experiences of the figure of Jesus entering our lives from the pages of Scripture – and by drawing attention to this inviting others, including herself, to respond and hopefully further clarify these tensions. In *Surprised by the Man on the Borrowed Donkey* she discusses Rahner’s *On the Theology of Death* (New York: Herder, 1965), at some length in her chapter on “Blessed are Those who Find Freedom, for They will be Free for Others,” 139–176, and freedom (like submission into death) was indeed a key theme for Rahner, but his presence in her life and work is much broader than simply one theme and one reference, albeit an indirect presence, mediated rather via their shared respect for the Ignatian spirituality.

Her own foundations were far less philosophical and speculative and her own loyalties to the teaching authority and doctrine of the church less obvious, but she certainly shared many of Rahner's pastoral concerns, his passion for the contemporary world, some of his specific spiritual background and mystical awareness, his joy in everyday realities, his concern about a growing spirit of human self-interest and greed, his solidarity with those who struggle to keep the faith in a wintry season, his deep sense of God as ultimate mystery – and his growing interest over the years in Jesus Christ, although I cannot recall him using the phrase “the man on the borrowed donkey.”

Over the years, I was privileged to have had many conversations with Denise about mystery, about contemplation, about meditation, about discernment, about the Scriptures – and about Jesus. I find it moving that her autobiographical account of what really matters to her is called *Surprised by the Man on the Borrowed Donkey*, the one “who walks out of the Scriptures into our daily lives, accompanies us and shows us the way.”

Listening to hearsay

In conclusion, however, I must admit that I have mostly been talking from hearsay about some of these things. In an interview on “The Immediate Experience of God in the *Spiritual Exercises* of Saint Ignatius of Loyola,” Rahner distinguished different alternatives that should not be confused with this direct and immediate experience of Godself. One such misleading alternative, he said, is reading about mysticism and the spiritual exercises, studying the literature and even following – and in fact teaching – theological courses on mysticism and spirituality. It is not the same, he said, not the real thing itself.⁵⁴

I have perhaps been influenced more by two equally famous contemporaries of Ignatius and Rahner, respectively, about both of whom Denise admits that she started reading them only later in her life, namely Calvin and Barth, both for whom faith was *faciem Dei contemplari*, contemplating the

54 Rahner, “The Immediate Experience of God in the *Spiritual Exercises* of Saint Ignatius of Loyola,” in *Karl Rahner in Dialogue*, 174–181.

face of God seen in Jesus Christ.⁵⁵ Jesuits are not particularly impressed by Calvinists⁵⁶ and Rahner famously described Barth's theological point of departure as "a real piece of nonsense."⁵⁷

However, I felt encouraged by another anecdote told about Rahner. Once, following one of his speeches, he responded to someone in the audience saying that, although he could not hear the person's question at all, he was in any case going to answer.⁵⁸ Perhaps that is one of the privileges of growing older, one may talk about things that you know you do not understand at all. Denise, congratulations on your 80th!

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- 55 Denise M. Ackermann, "Found Wanting and Left Untried?" – Confessions of a Ragbag Theologian," *Ragbag Theologies*, 269 ff., but also elsewhere, and often discussed at more length. For an attempt to show similarities between Calvin and Ackermann, see Dirk J. Smit, "Simple and Straightforward? – On Doing Theology," *Ragbag Theologies*, 157–174, and for an appreciation of Calvin's spirituality of "humility that is ultimately produced by wonder" that would probably also resonate with Ackermann, see Randall C. Zachman, *Reconsidering John Calvin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).
- 56 Ignatius in fact studied at the same Collège de Montaigu at the University of Paris where John Calvin also studied, but he arrived in France precisely during the time of anti-Protestant turmoil which had forced Calvin to flee France. The Society of Jesus, which Ignatius founded in 1539, would of course play an important role during the counter-Reformation. Remarkably, the motif *ad maiorem Dei gloriam* ("for the greater glory of God") became both the well-known Jesuit principle as well as a popular Calvinist vision. For an introduction to the Jesuit tradition, see e.g. Thomas Worcester (ed), *The Cambridge Companion to the Jesuits* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2008).
- 57 Rahner, "The Importance of Thomas Aquinas," in *Faith in a Wintry Season*, 47. For a very perceptive discussion of Rahner and public theology from a Protestant perspective, see J. J. F. (Jaap) Durand, "Salvation History, the Public Square and an Early Confrontation with Karl Rahner," in Len Hansen, Nico Koopman & Robert Vosloo (eds), *Living Theology* (Wellington: Bible Media, 2015), 515–524. Durand also raised the question of transcendence and history, but in a very different way, in his important doctoral dissertation on Thomas Aquinas, *Heilsgeschiedenis en die Dialektiek van Syn en Denke* (Stellenbosch, unpublished, 1973). For Durand on history and historicity, see also Dirk J. Smit, "In die Geskiedenis Ingegaan," in Ernst Conradie & Christo Lombard (eds), *Discerning God's Justice in Church, Society and Academy* (Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2009), 131–166.
- 58 One of Rahner's best-known students and the one who revised and published the 1941 text of *Hearers of the Word* (in German 1963, in English 1969), Johann Baptist Metz, told the story during the question and answer session after his paper on compassion during the Eight International Bonhoeffer Congress in Berlin in 2000.