

KARL RAHNER SOCIETY – CONSULTATION

Convener: Grace Agolia, Boston College
 Moderator: Madeline Jarrett, Boston College
 Presenter: Youngpa Kwon, Institute for Theology, Sogang University
 Respondent: Michael Rubbelke, St. John's University, Colledgeville

In her paper, “Bridging *Beisichsein* and Prehension: Toward a Metaphysical Theology of Evolution,” Youngpa Kwon brought English mathematician and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947) into conversation with German theologian Karl Rahner (1904-1984). She argued that Whitehead’s process metaphysics “gives flesh” to Rahner’s *Beisichsein*, “showing that every moment of becoming is simultaneously an act of Being and knowing.” Her overall aim was to advance dialogue between theology and science on evolution by extending Rahner’s insight into material self-transcendence to all of creation. Two passages from Rahner’s work served as Kwon’s point of departure. The first, from *Spirit in the World*, defines knowledge as the “being-present-to-itself [*Beisichsein*] of Being,” which, in turn, “is the Being of any entity.” The second is from *Foundations of Christian Faith*, where Rahner probes further into the active self-transcendence of matter to spirit, “the process whereby material, living, and spiritual beings come to be.” Rather than a problem to be dealt with, evolution is central to Rahner’s theological vision. In his “Christology within an Evolutionary View of the World,” the self-transcendence of matter unfolds toward the dynamism of the human spirit and its ultimate fulfillment in Christ. The Incarnation is the focal point of the world’s history, of God’s self-communication unfolding in time.

Kwon then compared Rahner’s notion of *Beisichsein*, “the identity of Being and knowing,” with Whitehead’s account of “prehension.” Distinctive to Whitehead’s metaphysical approach is its dynamic structure marked by a threefold teleological process. In Kwon’s reading of Whitehead, God “enables and shapes the self-creative advance of every actual entity.” Each actual entity, guided by an internal directive toward a particular form of unity, “prehends” its “datum” and emerges through “concrecence.” Through repeated cycles of datum → prehension → concrecence, reality continually generates itself. This representation of “becoming” was Whitehead’s attempt to integrate the discoveries of quantum mechanics and relativity in a way that metaphysical frameworks marked by seemingly more static concepts of space, substance, and time could not capture. For Kwon, Whitehead’s metaphysical account of generation in which every moment of being is simultaneously an act of knowing is a material enactment of Rahner’s *Beisichsein*. She proposed that this “processual *Beisichsein*” grounds a metaphysical theology of evolution in which every creature participates in God’s self-communication through self-transcendence: “every act of becoming—from the simplest datum to divine self-revelation—manifests the identity of Being and knowing in one self-present act.”

In his response, Michael Rubbelke expressed appreciation for Kwon’s emphasis on the “deeply relational and dynamic structure of Rahner’s epistemology,” a contribution that he described as “a gift to all Rahner scholars.” Her comparison of Rahner and Whitehead’s thought in understanding “all evolutionary advances

according to a central metaphysical pattern” has opened new directions for dialogue between theology and science. The convergences between their approaches illuminates Rahner’s *Beisichsein* as “*analogously present* throughout the whole ordering of the cosmos.” The similarity and dissimilarity in the way that all creation reflects the self-transcendence and integration of human knowing invites us to view “the cosmos as a kaleidoscopic presentation of this pattern of spirit and matter,” revealing the manifold presence of God’s glory. In this vision, “God is intimately joined with created causality, neither miraculously ‘filling in’ for creatures nor absent from the created world. God’s creative action and evolutionary causes work harmoniously together.”

Rubbelke then raised two questions and suggested two avenues for further exploration. The first question concerned Whitehead’s view of human freedom, whether he, like Rahner, understands human beings as having a unique role in “shepherding the cosmos to its destiny in God.” The second question concerned Whitehead’s view of divine causality, whether God is the highest cause among causes within the world or a transcendent cause on a different level altogether. The two avenues for future Rahnerian studies were, first, animal self-consciousness to concretize Rahner’s view of analogous self-presence, and, second, non-human difference, the dissimilarity between human beings and the non-human world, pertinent to critiques of Rahner as anthropocentric. For Rubbelke, inquiring into the distinct “characteristics of different and analogous levels of non-human self-presence can help Rahner speak more convincingly to our ecological crisis today.”

The conversation that followed was an event of *Beisichsein*. This was apparent in the active self-transcendence of those who sought clarity on the differences between Rahner and Whitehead’s views of primary and secondary causality and the vertical and horizontal finality of evolution. The discussion extended to how this research could benefit interreligious dialogue, Kwon’s own experience of returning to faith after encountering process theology, and her desire to communicate to younger generations that “one need not lose faith by looking at facts.”

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