

Research Note

Unmarked Roads to God: The A-Doctrinal Universalisms of Robert Barclay and Karl Rahner

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Abstract

For Karl Rahner and Robert Barclay, God's offer of life extends to all and can be accepted apart from the expressed Christian faith. In sketching this phenomenon, Rahner and Barclay present substantially different models, detailing transcendence in the arena of history and the action of the inward Light, respectively. This paper addresses these idiosyncrasies while identifying a crucial area of agreement: the divine foundation of both propositions.

Keywords

Universal, a-doctrinal, transcendence, Light, salvation, cross-traditional

Introduction

Separated by confessions and nearly three centuries, Quaker apologist Robert Barclay and Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner agree on one fundamental principle: the universality of salvation. In critiquing the doctrine of 'absolute reprobation', Barclay insists on God's desire to deliver all of humanity, writing, 'God, out of his infinite love, who delighteth not in the death of a sinner, but that all should live and be saved, hath sent his only Begotten Son into the world, that whosoever believeth in him may be saved.'¹ Rahner expresses a similar conviction, likewise rejecting the limited soteriology of Calvinism. In his *Foundations of Christian Faith* he writes,

In Catholic dogmatics God's salvific will is characterized as universal in contrast to the pessimism in Augustine or in Calvinism This very salvation is made

1 Barclay, R., *An Apology for the True Christian Divinity, as the Same is Held Forth, and Preached, by the People, Called in Scorn, Quakers*, Gale Eighteenth Century Collections Online, print edition, p. 117.

possible for every person within the infralapsarian situation of original sin, and it can be forfeited only through his own personal guilt.²

For both men, God intends to deliver the entire human race, and God's expansive salvation must be received personally.

Further, for Barclay and Rahner, universal salvation does not necessarily involve articulated Christianity. The 'a-doctrinal universalisms' proposed by these figures, however, differ in orientation and behaviour. For Barclay, the 'Light' or 'Seed' of God—a central Quaker concept—lies within all people as a divine element to be heeded or ignored, regardless of a person's proximity to the verbal evangel or the institutional church. A salvific overture arises internally, convicting within in the form of a divine energy. For Rahner, by contrast, a person accepts or rejects God a-doctrinally by exercising 'transcendence' in the divinely grounded historical sphere. God creates the opportunity for a human 'yes' or a 'no' to the divine, a 'yes' or 'no' realised 'unthematically' in the medium of life. Barclay's universal salvation involves the loud urgings of an interior divine force and the response of its host, while Rahner's unthematic conversion finds its root in divine creation and occurs in and through the often-opaque experiences of human existence.

This paper examines the contrasting a-doctrinal universalisms of Barclay and Rahner before noting a fundamental commonality: the divine origin of the universalisms. Barclay's Light, while internal, ultimately originates from without as that which is, to use Quaker language, 'of God'. Rahner's unthematic process also originates from God, who, as the basis of all, acts as the 'ground' of the unthematic process.

Rahner

In his *Foundations of Christian Faith*, Rahner notes the universality of salvation, which, he argues, lies open to 'every person regardless of where or at what time he lives'.³ The human need not learn of this salvation through religion or accept this salvation in a religious context.⁴ Rather, the human can accept or decline this universal 'offer of salvation' simply by operating humanly in the milieu of life, by 'unthematic' means. By the grace of God, humans possess a fundamental 'transcendence', which they exercise in a world 'grounded' by God.⁵ So located and endowed, the human rejects or accepts God by moving in a world rooted in God, by issuing a 'yes' or 'no' as a transcendent inmate of a divinely grounded history.⁶

2 Rahner, K., *Foundations of the Christian Faith: an introduction to the idea of Christianity*, trans. Dych, W. V., New York: Crossroad, 1978, p. 147.

3 Rahner, *Foundations*, pp. 128–29, 147.

4 Rahner, *Foundations*, pp. 131–32, 151–52.

5 Rahner, *Foundations*, pp. 123–24, 126–32.

6 Rahner, *Foundations*, pp. 123–24, 126–32.

Transcendent Being

Rahner understands the human as a ‘transcendent being’.⁷ The human can, for example, consider its potential derivation from creation and its rootedness in apparently determinative factors examined by the ‘social sciences’ (e.g. biological forces).⁸ In doing so, however, the human proves to be a non-reductive and self-possessed agent, demonstrating ‘transcendence’.⁹ Such transcendence can be seen in the human ability to entertain a limit to ‘human questioning’, to look upon ideas and reality from a panoramic remove of sorts.¹⁰ Through the use of this transcendence, the human appreciates itself and its environment, possessing an active awareness of self, an awareness of self in relation to surroundings and a concomitant awareness of the inherent limitedness of self.¹¹ The human grasps itself as an actor among actors, as part of an entirety.¹² As Rahner puts it, the human ‘does’ itself, making itself in a processual and conscious engagement with the wider world.¹³

The transcendence with which the human navigates self and world finds its root and terminus in God, who Rahner identifies as the ‘source’ and ‘term’ of transcendence.¹⁴ Human transcendence exists because God, in a ‘supernatural’ act of fundamental grace, in a basic ‘self-communication’, creates the human as a *potential* recipient of God and creates the space where the human may transcendently seek out its ‘fulfillment’ (i.e. God).¹⁵ Predisposed to God and given its transcendent freedom to this divine end, the human navigates history and a ‘coextensive’, simultaneous ‘salvation history’, the medium wherein God can be rejected or embraced through humanity’s transcendent self-reference and ‘self-realisation’, through its active engagement with life.¹⁶

A ‘Yes’ or ‘No’ to God

As an agent exercising transcendence in this crush of time and place, the human can dismiss or embrace the root and goal of its transcendence in an entirely ‘unthematic’ fashion.¹⁷ A transcendent figure moving through God’s medium of history, the human can respond affirmatively and negatively to God in the comings and goings of history, in great or mundane human dramas.¹⁸ A ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to God can arise, for instance, in the course of interpersonal encounter,

7 Rahner, *Foundations*, pp. 29–30.

8 Rahner, *Foundations*, pp. 29–31.

9 Rahner, *Foundations*, p. 31.

10 Rahner, *Foundations*, p. 32.

11 Rahner, *Foundations*, pp. 32, 34.

12 Rahner, *Foundations*, pp. 32, 34.

13 Rahner, *Foundations*, p. 94.

14 Rahner, *Foundations*, pp. 53–64.

15 Rahner, *Foundations*, pp. 123–24.

16 Rahner, *Foundations*, pp. 40–41, 140–42.

17 Rahner, *Foundations*, pp. 131–32.

18 Rahner, *Foundations*, pp. 97–102.

possibly with one's 'neighbour'.¹⁹ A 'yes' or 'no' can occur subtly in everyday existence.²⁰ But what, exactly, constitutes an unthematic 'yes' or 'no'?

Rahner cites a sense of finitude, a cognisance of 'alienation' in history and nature, as the means through which the human becomes 'most human' and receptive to God.²¹ A 'yes', then, occurs in this mode of awareness, flowing from an appreciation of an inescapable grandness.²² A sufferer can tire of a selfish disposition and look outward to something greater, becoming open to the wider 'mystery of his existence'.²³ Through the transcendent complex of awareness and action, the human can exit an individual smallness and 'reach radically beyond himself', coming to an enlightening appreciation of a larger reality and consenting to its warmth.²⁴ Someone can also act dismissively in the face of anything greater in their interpersonal and intra-historical activity, issuing a 'no' in the form of a dejected smallness.²⁵ And, in all, the content of human experience, the stage of human existence traversed transcendentally, acts as the stuff of these unthematic responses.²⁶ In all places and times and through the commonalties of places and times, the unthematic 'yes' or 'no' forms.²⁷

And yet, Rahner argues, the basic quality of human transcendence, its nature as something foundational to self-perception and action, prevents certainty about the precise occurrence of a 'yes' or 'no'.²⁸ The influence of human fallenness, moreover, prevents the pinpointing of an intentional 'yes' or 'no'.²⁹ Affected by others in a tapestry of collective infringement (i.e. fallenness), a human can never be sure about the free nature of its decisions and, thus, can never be sure about the intentionality of an apparent 'yes' or 'no'.³⁰ In the end, transcendence occurs broadly and in worldly encounter.³¹

Barclay

In his *Apology*—an influential standard of Quaker theology written in the seventeenth century—Robert Barclay takes great umbrage at the notion of 'absolute reprobation'.³² Railing against this doctrine adopted by Calvin and

19 Rahner, *Foundations*, pp. 98–99.

20 Rahner, *Foundations*, pp. 101–02.

21 Rahner, *Foundations*, pp. 42–43, 69–70.

22 Rahner, *Foundations*, pp. 42–43, 69–70, 132–32.

23 Rahner, *Foundations*, p. 131.

24 Rahner, *Foundations*, pp. 69–70, 131–32.

25 Rahner, *Foundations*, pp. 32–33, 98–99, 103–04.

26 Rahner, *Foundations*, pp. 131–32, 151–52.

27 Rahner, *Foundations*, pp. 131–32, 151–52.

28 Rahner, *Foundations*, pp. 101–02, 109–10, 133.

29 Rahner, *Foundations*, pp. 101–02, 109–10, 133.

30 Rahner, *Foundations*, pp. 101–02, 109–10; 133.

31 Rahner, *Foundations*, pp. 101–102, 133.

32 The full title, in the florid style of the time, reads 'An Apology for the True Christian Divinity, as the Same is Held Forth, and Preached, by the People, Called in Scorn, Quakers';

others, Barclay stresses the undeniable universality of Christian salvation, seeing anything less as a perversion of the gospel.³³ Barclay refuses to accept a God who, based on Barclay's reading of reprobation, preemptively condemns humans to damnation and therefore becomes an author of evil revelling in the inexorability of creaturely failure.³⁴ Barclay will not entertain a gospel reduced to a 'lye' (sic) by limited salvation, a gospel deceptively calling all hearers to a repentance only a few hearers can actually know.³⁵ In vociferously opposing these distortions, Barclay offers an a-doctrinal universalism differing from Rahner's in a number of respects. Barclay stresses an eminently divine 'Light' or 'Seed' planted in all humans, an internal agent eliciting a response not through the sometimes-vague experiences of history, not in conjunction with a transcendent human freedom, but through its own distinct inner promptings.

Anthropology and Scope

In formulating his distinctively Quaker a-doctrinal universalism, Barclay takes a dim view of human abilities, contending that innate universal phenomena such as Catholic 'free-will' or the 'Light of Nature' inflate the human role in salvation to an unacceptable degree.³⁶ According to Barclay, the fallen human knows no innate awareness or freedom of salvific consequence, lacking the power to exit its degraded or 'natural' condition and often lacking any awareness of its woeful state.³⁷ The fallen human race does not, to use Barclay's illustration, cry out for a ladder from the pit of fallenness or proceed upward under its own power after seizing a ladder lowered by God.³⁸ Rather, God takes all the initiative, alerting the human race to its condition and administering an unsolicited treatment to the human race.³⁹

In working out his universalism, Barclay also contends with the sheer scope of universal salvation, which he finds conveyed in, among other passages, Rom. 10:18.⁴⁰ Here, Barclay sees conformation of a gospel spread throughout the

in their respective remarks on Barclay's *Apology*, Howard H. Brinton and Eleanore Price Mather emphasise a longstanding Quaker regard for Barclay's systematic work. Brinton calls it 'a book of great historical importance, which, for more than two centuries, was considered the best and most authoritative exposition of Quaker belief and practice'. Mather expresses similar sentiments, referring to the *Apology* as 'the book which more clearly and comprehensively than any other formulates the doctrine of the Society of Friends'. See Mather, E. P. (ed.), *Barclay in Brief*, Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Publishers, 2014, Kindle edition, preface and introduction.

33 Barclay, *Apology*, pp. 110–19.

34 Barclay, *Apology*, pp. 112–15.

35 Barclay, *Apology*, pp. 115, 119.

36 Barclay, *Apology*, pp. 128–29, 134.

37 Barclay, *Apology*, pp. 148–51.

38 Barclay, *Apology*, pp. 148–151.

39 Barclay, *Apology*, p. 151.

40 Barclay, *Apology*, p. 170.

world, 'unto the ends of the World'.⁴¹ But, Barclay argues, the 'outward gospel' has never achieved such a range, not in the time of the apostles or even in Barclay's time. The gospel, then, has spread globally by different means. The 'Chinees' (sic) and the 'Indian' lacking the verbal and ecclesial gospel avail themselves of universal salvation by turning to something else, to an 'inward gospel'.⁴²

The 'Universal Saving Light'

This inward gospel found in all humans, 'whether Jew or Gentile, Turk or Scythian, Indian or Barbarian', possesses its own life as a force of divine origin.⁴³ This 'Seed' or 'Light' functions as a drop of divine power wherein 'God, as father, son, and spirit dwells'.⁴⁴ It is the 'spiritual body of Christ', the enlightening ray of Jn 1:9 shining in the darkness of the abjectly fallen human.⁴⁵ The parabolic 'talent' or 'mustard seed', it cannot be confused with human components (e.g. 'soul' or 'reason') and 'God and Christ' lie 'wrapped up' within it.⁴⁶ This Seed comes from God as that of God, facing no geographical boundaries and existing independent of human 'faculties'.⁴⁷ It does not beckon without, but from within, asserting itself in the bowels. It does not form or make contact through the filtered workings of history, but forms inside as something embedded, as a living coal in the human site.

This divine capsule elicits an affirmative or negative human response through a certain convicting pressure, pricking the human in what Barclay presents as an uncontrollable and clear 'day of visitation'.⁴⁸ At an unpredictable hour, God, via the Seed, makes the human fully aware of its sinfulness and needfulness.⁴⁹ Through the workings of the Seed, a litany of personal sins becomes apparent and the offer of salvation beckons.⁵⁰ This revealing proposition of the Seed manifests internally, putting the onus on the human, who feels an internal urgency.⁵¹ No one, Barclay argues, can deny this happening or claim exemption from this pull.⁵² The Seed wrenches the heartstrings, prodding all people from inside. Its alert does not reside diffusively in the currents of history or require contextualisation. It does not escape the experiencer. Rather, it arises inside and makes a human 'sensible' of its emergence, peeking declaratively through the 'soil' of fallenness.⁵³

41 Barclay, *Apology*, p. 170.

42 Barclay, *Apology*, pp. 186, 167, 170.

43 Barclay, *Apology*, pp. 132–33.

44 Barclay, *Apology*, p. 138.

45 Barclay, *Apology*, pp. 137–38, 160–66.

46 Barclay, *Apology*, pp. 138, 143–47.

47 Barclay, *Apology*, pp. 132–22, 138, 143–47.

48 Barclay, *Apology*, pp. 147–48, 151–60.

49 Barclay, *Apology*, pp. 147–48.

50 Barclay, *Apology*, p. 148.

51 Barclay, *Apology*, pp. 134, 148, 164.

52 Barclay, *Apology*, pp. 134, 148.

53 Barclay, *Apology*, p. 148.

The acceptance of the Seed's entreaty, which Barclay describes not as an act but as inertia, a non-act in the face of God's action, results in the flourishing of the inward 'Word', in the bloom of the mustard seed.⁵⁴ The acceptance of the inward overture sets the progressive growth of the Seed in motion, a growth achieving an utter purgation of human rot and bringing about new creaturehood.⁵⁵ The acknowledged Seed works within as a 'substance', as an additive of sorts achieving 'healthfulness', as 'medicine' working in and upon the human constitution.⁵⁶

The rejection of God, however, brings about a 'hardening', a state in which the human stands closed to the workings of God and does not attain the malleability of iron or wax 'warmed' by the divine, but remains cold and firm permanently, like dried clay.⁵⁷

Inward To Outward

Thoroughly 'inward', the Seed or Light gleams at God's pleasure, shining onto the exterior circumstances of history, setting and time. The Light moves inwardly and then outwardly, seizing the human and instructing it, acting interiorly to exterior effect.⁵⁸ Personal holiness comes from the tutelage of the Seed, which bestows qualities such as 'temperance' and 'meekness'.⁵⁹ A person becomes pure through internality and then exports personal pureness, acting out of an inward purity. Communal holiness also comes from the Seed, which makes humans conscious of 'equity', 'justice' and 'honesty'.⁶⁰

The Light shines and tests not through any vague worldly intercourse, but independent of it. In fact, for Barclay, what modern theologians refer to as 'natural revelation' cannot occur without the informative influence of the Light. The knowledge of God apparently gleaned in and through nature, Barclay argues, actually comes from the Seed, which allows an observer to glimpse the divine underlying nature.⁶¹ Without the lens of the Seed, Barclay insists, creation cannot communicate its 'invisible' foundation, and all those looking upon creation can be considered 'blind men'.⁶² As with morality, the inward illumines the outward.

Conclusion: Impasses and Bridges

As the above treatments hopefully show, contrasting distinctives appear in the a-doctrinal universalisms of Barclay and Rahner. Rahner's transcendent human

54 Barclay, *Apology*, pp. 171, 176–78.

55 Barclay, *Apology*, pp. 151–52, 171, 181.

56 Barclay, *Apology*, pp. 139–41.

57 Barclay, *Apology*, p. 151.

58 Barclay, *Apology*, p. 182.

59 Barclay, *Apology*, p. 182.

60 Barclay, *Apology*, p. 182.

61 Barclay, *Apology*, pp. 168–69.

62 Barclay, *Apology*, pp. 168–69.

responds to the external stimuli of history and existence, departing or drawing nearer to God in an oft-veiled journey of interaction and personal development. Rahner's human meets God in the medium of history, coming to 'belief' or unbelief as a result of the intuitive application of transcendence. Barclay's subject, on the other hand, experiences the weight of an interior particle, knowing a distinct divine needling. No matter a person's outward circumstances, a divine agent urges within, creating an opportunity for acquiescence and, if accepted, acting as an inner luminary.

While these differences in orientation and perceptibility may be regarded as possible impassés, a basic commonality can be found in both universalisms. However intensely Barclay might protest in his anti-Catholic scepticism, the 'self-communication' at the root of Rahner's human precludes a 'Natural Light' by which humanity approaches salvation.⁶³ As Rahner insists, God freely creates human transcendence and its field of experience, acting as the Alpha and Omega of the salvific journey.⁶⁴ Humanity receives its power of transcendence and freedom, along with the arena in which to apply that power, from and in God.⁶⁵ The entire affair begins and ends with God, with the transcendent human trek emanating from the 'supernatural' action of God, a supernatural action at the very heart of human composition and functionality.⁶⁶ Rahner addresses these issues in his remarks on the historically problematic doctrine of *sola gratia*:

The Council of Trent teaches, of course, that a person is free in the process of attaining his salvation. But a human freedom, a human capacity, or a human power which could contribute something of its own and something positive to salvation all by itself and by its own autonomy and power, so that Christian salvation would not be totally a pure gift of God which God bestows upon man in a love which cannot be coerced, this conception is not found in the official and binding doctrine of the Catholic church.⁶⁷

Given these facts, Rahner's universalism finds common cause with Barclay's universalism. Utterly divine, the internal Seed clearly begins with God and, whether accepted or declined in human freedom, whether liberative or condemning, ends with God. Barclay's divine 'principle' acts, in a sense, as ground and terminus of salvation, as starting point and, in its transformative development, as conclusion.

Rahner and Barclay both recognise a universally operative God unbound by a given locus, a God intending and engineering the vast reception of Godself. Conversations about God's global goodness, then, can reveal mutual convictions and promote deeper cross-traditional understanding. As the mechanics of these a-doctrinal universalisms prove, however, such conversations can also reveal

63 Rahner, *Foundations*, pp. 56–57, 123–24.

64 Rahner, *Foundations*, pp. 56–57, 123–24.

65 Rahner, *Foundations*, pp. 56–57, 123–24.

66 Rahner, *Foundations*, pp. 56–57, 123–24.

67 Rahner, *Foundations*, p. 359.

conceptual differences. In the final analysis, those who would follow Barclay and Rahner in charting a-doctrinal roads to God must remain humble before the prerogative of God. If we move in God's history or all find ourselves called by God somehow, we might be confronted with God anywhere or in anyone. This reality demands a decidedly universal outlook from theologians and from those claiming membership in the easily identifiable church.

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