

# Catholic Theology & Scientific Culture

Karl Rahner's Model

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## Introduction

Theology has always to be in contact with the contemporary culture if it wants to do its duty: to mediate the Divine Revelation to people of a certain time and of a certain place.

While in the past the culture was exclusively humanistic, now it is undoubtedly also scientific. For this reason, to relate to the modern scientific culture is not something optional for theology but a necessity if it wants to enter into the lives of contemporary men and women.

Our culture, in particular, is now strongly influenced by natural sciences and their view of the world and so it's necessary for theology to deal also with them if it wants to have a cultural influence.

About the possible models of relation between natural sciences and theology, it is then normal inside catholic theology to refer to Teilhard de Chardin as an example to follow. But also another important theologians of the twentieth century, Karl Rahner, has something to say on this topic.

## *1. Distinction but not separation between natural science and theology*

K. Rahner put a very clear distinction between theology and natural science, but this distinction never arrives at an absolute separation. For him science and theology refer to two different kind of human experiences and form two different realms of human knowledge:

- **Natural science** is the investigation of concrete individual phenomena and their interrelation in an **“a posteriori” experience**. It’s a form of knowledge that is then thematic and can be classified in different ways.
- **Theology** has instead to do with an **“a priori” knowledge** about the totality of reality and its ground: a knowledge that is always present in every human experience of the world. It is a knowledge that is not acquired and obtained, but that is already present and given with human existence (it’s *“a priori”*): it’s connected to the “act of being” of the human person. It is knowledge that is “unthematic”, non-classifiable, that doesn’t concern particular objects but **the awareness of the totality, the infinity, the eternity and the necessary**, that is the condition of possibility of our experience of the singular, the finite, the mutable and the contingent. **The object of theology is just this awareness**, this “spiritual” dimension of the human person, because in it is present also God as its cause and condition of possibility.

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In this way it's clear that science and theology are two disciplines with **two different objects** and so also with **two different methods**. From this follows that:

- One discipline cannot contradict the other and so, in theory, every conflict is solvable
- We can have a real dialogue between these two disciplines, because every one is free to be itself and must not renounce its identity when confronting with the other.
- Theology will not relate so much to science, as to scientific culture, to that understanding of our world and mankind which is rooted in science. Theology proposes a theological interpretation of scientific data that relates with other metaphysical and religious interpretation of them.

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This basic distinction into two different levels of knowledge is true but in practice **these two disciplines interact** between themselves, sometimes also in a conflictual way. This is however **unavoidable** and also **positive**.

- It is **unavoidable**, because this “unthematic”, non-classifiable awareness that is the object of theology is **necessarily** transformed by this same discipline into a thematic and classifiable form of knowledge, a knowledge that the human consciousness, being *one*, will be forced to try to integrate with the rest of its knowledge. This process of integration is then endless and tends only asymptotically to an unity that will be reached only in the act of abandoning ourselves into the unity of God, renouncing the claim of knowing (*docta ignorantia*). In his thought, in fact, knowing and willing or knowing and love, form an unity and are one in the other (*perichoresis*), and together are in “movement” towards God (the absolute Truth and Good). What is important here is that this unity of knowing and willing can be reasonably neglected when one thinks of the single things of the world, like in natural sciences, but not when one thinks of the totality of the world, like in theology, where one is existentially involved at the highest level. In this way, we have **another difference between these two discipline** that adds to the previous one and that have an effect on the kind of intellectual evidence pertaining to science and to theology: **in science we have an evidence apart from any act of our will, in theology we have an evidence only thanks to the involvement of our will.**
- This interaction between science and theology is lastly also **positive**, because the conflicts arising in this never ending process of integration will make each discipline more conscious of its limits and of the fact that it cannot propose itself as the final synthesis that does not need the contribution of other disciplines.

## *1. Distinction but not separation between natural science and theology*

To show the limits of every discipline is especially **the duty of theology**, that has always to remind to science that the scientific description of the world is not total, that there is something important in the world and in humanity that science cannot grasp with its methods. In other words, the main duty of theology is to help avoiding any reductionism about world and mankind.

**The duty of science** is instead to give to theology that knowledge about our world and mankind that is different from the past and that theology has to know for being able to transmit its message in a way that can be accepted (with a sufficient degree of intellectual honesty) by the contemporary humanity and, especially by that of the future. From this point of view, theology has to try hard to learn from science, probably more than what it is doing now.

Rahner's thought is so extremely clear that science and theology are two distinct disciplines that have to remain distinct but, since neither of them are and can be the final synthesis of human knowing, one will always need the other and vice versa. We have and must have therefore between them a continuous dialogue. This put him, in catholic theology, in a middle position between the theology of Hans Urs von Balthassar, that sees the two discipline as two separate worlds without relationships, and the theology of Teilhard de Chardin, that aims to a sort of integration between these two disciplines and forms at the end a kind of "theologized science".



## *2. A dialogical model*

Rahner himself uses in his writings this dialogical model that he proposes. We see now a few examples to clarify his position.

Speaking of mankind, **he accepts** the **continuity** that science thinks to see in the **processes** that first produced the inorganic universe, then the organic life and lastly mankind. He doesn't discuss it and never enters in the scientific argumentation to try to make it more suitable for a traditional theology. He simply assumes it for granted, in its most general terms, and tries to show that in his theology this assumption **can be integrated with the fundamental Christian beliefs** of the presence of a divine causality and of an ontological "more" in mankind.

For doing this he introduces two new theological terms: that of "self-transcendence", applied to created things, and that of "transcendental divine causality" applied to the action of God in the universe. With these two terms he wants to emphasize that the creatures have in themselves the capacity - thanks to the continuous support of the Creator - to go beyond themselves and to become something *more* and not only something *different* from what they were before.

This way of thinking has been surely influenced by the thought of Teilhard de Chardin and, in particular, by his idea of a guided evolution in the direction of an ever bigger complexity. But in Rahner this evolutive process with a well-defined purpose **doesn't want to be a scientific model** that has to be defended on the scientific level, but a theological statement that wants to give sense to our world in a way that is beyond, but not against, science. As we said before, in Rahner's thought theology must only be in dialogue with Science and must not mix up with it: they are two different disciplines.

## *2. A dialogical model*

Now we see **another way of dialoguing** with science that is “weaker” than the preceding example, seeing that the scientific view of our world is used as a stimulus, a prompt, for rethinking theology. Here **no scientific data is used in theology**, but all happens internally in this discipline when confronted with science.

Rahner uses this method when he deals with the doctrine of the original sin and its consequences. Here he notices that “monogenism” (we all descend from Adam and Eve) is problematic for modern science and so theology has to investigate if there are theological reasons for considering it a fact that cannot be given up. If we do so, he thinks that we will see that “monogenism” cannot be theologically demonstrated either in a direct way or in an indirect way, and so it is not a necessary theological assumption.

For all these reasons Rahner thinks that is not necessary for theology to enter in the scientific discussion about the origins of humanity in view of saving the doctrine of the original sin. The problem of theology is only that of seeing if it would be possible, respecting its theological method, to reconcile this doctrine with the new scientific vision. If this is possible, as Rahner thinks it is in this case, the task of theology is finished.

The same way of reasoning is used by Rahner when considering the problem of physical death seen as a consequence of the original sin. Also here he starts noticing that this is in conflict with science and so theology has to reconsider the problem, in accord with its method, to see if it can be understood and reformulated better. If we do this, Rahner thinks that we can see that there are theological motivations (and not only scientific ones) for saying that the physical death cannot be a consequence of the original sin.



### *3. Conclusions*

**From a theological point of view**, we can say that he always makes an exhaustive study of the subjects and that his theology is, at the same time, traditional and new, seeing that he reformulates the Christian faith in a form that is respectful both of the modern scientific culture and of the Christian tradition.

Inside Catholic theology, his work is not so “new” and open to science as that of Teilhard de Chardin and not so “traditional” and close to science as that of Hans Urs von Balthassar. Both models give some problems, the first because sometimes the results are very original but also problematic and discussible; the second because it practically doesn't take into account the modern scientific culture and “restrict” its attention to the humanistic part of the culture, as it was normal in the past when science was a game for few and not a cultural phenomenon.

This middle and balanced position make Rahner's theology a useful model also for today.

### *3. Conclusions*

**From a scientific point of view** his work could seem too abstract, seeing that it stays always on the theological level and never goes into the proper scientific discussion. Scientific data enter into the theological argumentation, if they enter, only in a very general form and as “theologically transformed”. Usually, however, they just ask for a theological reflection on traditional doctrines that are in conflict with them. As a consequence of all this, science and theology never enter in a real “symbiosis” and nothing really new arises.

In other words, **K. Rahner’s model is characterised by the very “weak” way in which science acts on and enters in theology**, and this could be seen by somebody as a negative point, especially in a context, like ours, in which science has great importance.

It is, however, necessary to notice three things about this way of considering the relationships between science and theology.

- The first is that this “weak” use of science in theology is connected with the general assumption made by Rahner on the fundamental distinction between these two disciplines, as regards both the object and the method: they don’t speak, in different ways, of the same thing, but they speak of different things and so it is not possible to take an element of one discipline and simply insert it, without any transformation, into the other. To posit this clear distinction and to act consequently can however hardly be considered as negative, seeing that many false problems and mutual misunderstandings arise just because this distinction is ignored: like, for example, in the “Intelligent Design Movement” or in the idea of an irresolvable conflict between Darwinism and Christian faith.

### *3. Conclusions*

- It is then important to remember that for him this distinction doesn't mean an absolute separation between these two disciplines, but a **complementarity** between two explanations of our world that are surely at a different level but that are also *necessarily* connected and that *necessarily* have to enter into dialogue for having a complete and true knowledge of the reality. The importance of this is evident if we consider what is happening, for example, in the already cited "Intelligent Design Movement", where we can find both a trust and a mistrust in science that have characterized our modern and "post-modern" times. In the "modern era" we had indeed a so strong trust in science that it produced the myth of a science that was supposed to explain everything in our lives. Now, in the "post-modern era", we realized that science cannot explain all and in the "Intelligent Design Movement" we see some aspects of this mistrust. At the same time, however, the "Intelligent Design Movement" has still some sort of trust in the "omni-comprehensiveness" of science seeing that it doesn't want to abandon the scientific paradigm and tries only to introduce "some metaphysical corrections" into science for restoring its capacity to explain the multidimensional reality of our world: but this is problematic, and creates scientific, philosophical and theological problems. A position, like that of Rahner, is surely offering a better solution and has the capacity of developing a two-basic-level description of reality, with independent but complementary disciplines in dialogue between them, that is something that we need for the future, I think..

### 3. Conclusions

- The last thing to notice is that a “strong” use of scientific data inside theology, in view of making its statements more understandable and more evident is also problematic.
  - This greater evidence either is not so evident (as in the theology of W. Pannenberg) or is reached through a deep reinterpretation of traditional theology that, at the end, reduces theology inside the limits of scientific rationality (as in I. Barbour and A. Peacocke).
  - Is it possible to make theological statements evident for a scientific point of view? For Rahner this is impossible. If we will ever reach a clear scientific evidence inside theology, this will mean for him that theology mistook its object and is not speaking anymore of God but of its own idea of God; it will mean that theology mistook the ground of the world for one of its objects. Theology necessarily must go beyond, even if not necessarily against, the scientific knowledge of the world if it must speak of something that is outside the borders of science but inside its own: the ground, the meaning and the aim of existence.

This lack of scientific evidence is in accord with the fundamental nature of theology, that is not only a “science” but also a **wisdom**. Its main purpose is indeed not so much to inform people about something in a scientifically clear way as to give that knowledge that is necessary for performing a free chosen act with a sufficient degree of intellectual honesty. The act we are speaking of, is the act of abandoning ourselves to the mystery of God, that is the only thing that can bring “evidence” to the theological argumentation: only abandoning ourselves to this mystery can we experience that the abyss into which we are falling, and which gives us that *a priori* awareness of infinity, it is not the emptiness of the nothing but the fullness of the being. So the lack of scientific evidence inside theology is not a deficiency but the manifestation of the mystery that stays always in front of us and asks for a decision.