has traditionally assumed that God acts graciously on people in an indirect way through sacramental means in the natural order of the world. However, it is a perfectly accepted part of Protestant sacramental theology that the grace of God touches and transforms human persons through created things. Only if the giver of grace is obscured or displaced, and grace becomes an almost independent and efficacious power or causality, does this become problematic. It is Christ himself, through the Spirit, who makes himself present in person and grants us koinonia with him through word and sacrament. What is clear in recent Catholic theology is its determination to speak theologically, to set its anthropological concerns within a properly theological framework, to see grace not only in relation to nature but in relation to its source, the God of grace. The two traditions do not in every respect use the same vocabulary; nor need they. They do, however, much more so than in earlier times, speak a common theological language.

Chapter 7

Not Quite Unconfined?

Barth and Rahner Halt at apokatastasis

Geoff Thompson

The Issue

The point of departure for this paper is two strikingly similar comments on the topic of apokatastasis — the first from Karl Barth and the second from Karl Rahner.

We should be denying or disarming that attempt [to change the truth into untruth] and our own participation in it, if in relation to ourselves or others or all men, we were...to expect or maintain an apokatastasis or universal reconciliation as the goal and end of all things. No such postulate can be made even though we appeal to the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Even though theological consistency might seem to lead our thoughts and utterances most clearly in this direction we must not arrogate to ourselves that which can be given and received only as a free gift.¹

However, since Christians believe in the infinite goodness and the true salvific will of God ... they hope for a universal redemption ... This hope, however, gives them no justification for a theoretical doctrine of apokatastasis, even though such a doctrine has constantly recurred in the doctrinal history of Christianity since Origen. The authentic Christian attitude regarding the end of the history of the individual and of humankind as a whole remains one of

¹ Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956–1975) IV/3, 477. Hereafter, all reference to the Church Dogmatics will be in the form of CD volume no/part no, page no.
hope, despite all (empirical) experience to the contrary, and silent surrender before the unfathomable disposition of the Lord of history.²

Both theologians halt at the idea of an unequivocal and unqualified doctrine of universal salvation, the doctrine which the Christian tradition has denoted (with some etymological imprecision) as the doctrine of *apokatastasis.*³ In neither case is the rejection of this doctrine an abstract or isolated doctrinal position. Both theologians maintain what they do about *apokatastasis* in ways which reflect other more fundamental theological commitments. Yet the suggestion has been made in the case of both theologians that *apokatastasis* was the inevitable de facto outcome of precisely those prior, more basic theological moves. In fact, although profoundly different in their respective methodologies and theological proposals, there is an area of common ground precisely at the level of these basic theological moves: Barth and Rahner share an underlying optimism about the universality of the grace of God. Hence the question: If they halt at *apokatastasis,* are they qualifying this commitment to the radicalness and universality of God's grace? Is it the case, then, that in their formulations this grace, by which each of them is so gripped, is not quite unconfined?

That is the presenting question I will explore in this paper. The answer, however, leads into some deeper theological questions about the relationship between the grace of God and human freedom, and about the Christian understanding of God.

Yet, before moving directly into those discussions, a word is necessary about the more general cluster of issues which surround the topic, regardless of the views of Barth and Rahner. Even an affirmation of *apokatastasis* points to dimensions of Christian faith which create an awkwardness for many Christians. In modern secular contexts – of which Australia is a distinctly potent manifestation – the eschatological dimensions of Christianity are part of what makes Christianity intellectually problematic and even culturally offensive. And, within the churches themselves, perhaps not least in the mainline protestant churches, a rhetoric of inclusiveness, tolerance and pluralism has tended to render moot even the question to which the doctrine of *apokatastasis* is an answer.

So, is there really anything to be gained from engaging these two theologians on this issue? I propose that there is, and do so for two reasons. First, the eschatological is a given of Christianity, however much it may have been, and continues to be, distorted throughout Christian history. Yet, as the pivotal debates of twentieth-century theology showed, a Christianity without eschatology is itself likely to be a distorted Christianity.⁴ Secondly, if among those distortions of eschatology is the abstraction of eschatology from the doctrine of God, then Barth and Rahner offer important resources for correcting that distortion. The way that they tackle this issue reminds us that the question of the denial or affirmation of *apokatastasis* is legitimate only to the extent that it is grounded in and takes its bearing from the Christian understanding of God.

So, to return to the topic, and against the background of their reservations, what is to be made of the following more open-ended comments by the same two theologians?

Barth's open-ended position can be seen in this declaration:

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⁴ “If Christianity be not altogether thoroughgoing eschatology, there remains in it no relationship with Christ.” So Barth himself in *The Epistle to the Romans* 6th edn. (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), 314. The comment echoed long and loudly throughout twentieth-century theology.
[With regard to *apokatastasis*, it would be well to let oneself be spurred on by the passage, Col 1:19 ... and by the parallel passages, to consider whether the conception is not susceptible of a good interpretation ... One thing is sure, that there is no theological justification for setting any limits on our side to the friendliness of God towards man which appeared in Jesus Christ – it is our theological duty to see and to understand that as even greater than we had done before.]

Rahner’s openness to the possibility of *apokatastasis* can be found in this question and his own answer to it:

[C]an the Christian believe even for a moment that the overwhelming mass of his brothers not only those before the appearance of Christ right back to the most distant past ... but also those of the present and of the future before us, are unquestionably and in principle excluded from the fulfilment of their lives and condemned to eternal meaninglessness? He must reject any such suggestion, and his faith is itself in agreement with his doing so. For the scriptures tell him expressly that God wants everyone to be saved (1 Tim 2:4); the covenant of peace which God made with Noah after the flood has never been abrogated: on the contrary, the Son of God himself has sealed it with the incontestable authority of his self-sacrificing love embracing all men.

What grounds these respective affirmations, these declarations of a hope which, it would seem, could only be arbitrarily or artificially denied, resisted or confined? What lies between these reservations about *apokatastasis* and the affirmations of its possibility? Incoherence? Inconsistency? Nuance? What is weighted more in their respective theologies: the reservations or the affirmations?

To address these questions I will offer a brief exposition of the theologies which underlie these affirmations. I will then briefly explore the reasons for...
If the distinctive and ultimate feature in God is absolute freedom of choice, or a absolutely free choice, then it will be hard to distinguish His freedom from caprice or His mystery from the blindness of such caprice .... It will then be difficult to make it clear that God is not merely a tyrant living by His whims, that he is not merely blind fate.10

Barth broke this nexus between sovereignty and election. He subordinated divine sovereignty to divine grace, and then brought election into direct relationship with grace. So, when God is understood as love — which is the claim of the gospel — the idea of election looks very different. "There is", writes Barth, "no such thing as a will of God apart from the will of Jesus Christ."11 Accordingly:

What takes place in election is that God is for us; for us, and therefore for the world which was created by Him .... [Election] means that the will for fellowship, which is [Gods'] very being and to which the world owes its existence, is actually demonstrated to the world in a way which surpasses anything that could be expected or claimed.12

Indeed, this will to be for humanity in Jesus Christ is the "primal history which underlies and is the goal of the whole history of His relationship ad extra."13 It is "by virtue of the decision of His free love [that] God wills to be and is God."14 And this is grace. The movement in creation and covenant towards the world is grace. As grace

it is the demonstration, the overflowing of the love which is the being of God, that He who is entirely self-sufficient, who even within Himself cannot know isolation, wills even in all His divine glory to share His life with another .... [Grace] is love which is overflowing, free, unconstrained, and unconditioned.15

This gracious election of humanity means that the most fundamental thing to be said about any human being is that she is elect of God. In one of his strongest statements about this universality of election, Barth writes:

That which has been eternally determined in Jesus Christ is concretely determined for every individual man to the extent that in the form of the witness of Israel and of the Church it is addressed to him and applies to him and comes to him, to the extent that in His Word the electing God enters with him into the relationship of Elector to elected, and by His Word makes him an elected man.16

Not even the divine rejection of human sin alters this. The divine rejection is not an alternative, equal possibility to election. It is absorbed within election. So, when Jesus suffers the divine rejection of sinful humanity, he elects to suffer this rejection precisely because he remains — without interruption — for the world. "He is the Rejected, as and because He is the Elect. In view of His election there is no other rejected but Himself."17

Clearly, this set of ideas raises a range of doctrinal, exegetical and conceptual questions. For present purposes, however, I want simply to draw attention to the fact and consequences of Barth's particular appropriation of Christian faith's axiomatic identity of Jesus Christ with the ways, purposes and identity of God. It is this identity which allows him to claim that God is love, gracious love; that God is for the world and for human beings; and that for this reason all are the elect of God.

Rahner's Underlying Theology of Grace

Rahner's affirmation of the fundamental optimism of grace is similarly driven by a correction of his tradition. Interestingly, however, in making this correction he also takes a sideways glance at Protestant ideas about grace and even an explicit, albeit passing, rejection of the Reformers' double decree. "Catholic theology", he writes, "has always rejected as heretical the doctrine of the double, antecedent and parallel predestination to glory and to

11. Barth, CD II/2, 115.
13. Barth, CD II/2, 8–9.
15. Barth, CD II/2, 9–10.
16. Barth, CD II/2, 309f.
17. Barth, CD II/2, 353.
damnation”. Rather, “only one predestination will be spoken of in Christian eschatology: And it contains only one theme...the victory of grace.” Nevertheless, it is in his engagement with his own Catholic tradition which produces the particular contours of his account of this optimism of grace.

Although it is worked out in a different manner to the way it is in Barth, the idea of the saving will of God revealed in Christ is the fundamental axiom of his approach. It is this which is fundamentally determinative of God’s posture towards the world. But more than just a posture, and far more concretely so than in the case of Barth, it is an offer of grace, indeed a universal offer of grace. And, there is one further – and significant – difference from Barth: where the doctrinal locus of the universal scope of grace in Barth’s account is election, in Rahner it is anthropology.

For Rahner human existence is graced existence; human existence per se is oriented towards God. It is in developing such a claim that he rejects the extrinsicism of the scholastics and where he seeks to offer a corrective. He resists the idea of a purely natural existence to which grace must necessarily be an external or alien addition. He also resists objectivist accounts of grace (“grace is not thought of as a ‘thing’”) and proposes instead that “[g]race is God himself, the communication in which he gives himself to man as the divinising favour which he himself is”. These various ideas combine to produce Rahner’s idea of human existence itself being a ‘supernatural existential’. Fundamentally, the human being “is the event of God’s self-communication”; “Man is who he is always confronted with the holy mystery.” More extensively:

20. The key elements of Rahner’s critique and counter-proposal are found in his seminal essay, “Nature and Grace”, TJ IV, 165-188.

Whether he is consciously aware of it or not, whether he is open to this truth or suppresses it, man’s whole spiritual and intellectual existence is oriented towards a holy mystery which is the basis of his being...It is our most fundamental, most natural condition, but for that very reason it is also the most hidden and least regarded reality, speaking to us by its silence, and even whilst appearing to be absent, revealing its presence by making us take cognizance of our own limitations.

The grace of God, he writes, should not be conceived as “an isolated intervention on God’s part at particular points in an otherwise profane world.” Instead it is a “constantly present existential of the [human] creature and of the world in general.” Accordingly, “grace is constantly implanted in the nature of the creature.” So much so, that accepting the freedom of the human condition is itself a response to this grace. A human being accepts this grace “whenever he really accepts himself completely, for it already speaks in him”. This gracious self-presence, this self-offering of God, is the presupposition of all creaturely existence whether it is acknowledged or not. Even more radically:

Even if a person does not think of God as part of his conscious vocabulary or even feels that he has to reject such a concept, he is nevertheless always and inevitably involved with God in his secular awareness. Without reflection he accepts God when he feely accepts himself in his own unlimited transcendence.

Clearly, this is taking us towards a discussion of Rahner’s idea of anonymous Christians, which obviously is not unrelated to the present topic, but is nevertheless distinct from it. The present point, however, is that Rahner moves towards this position of the universality of the offer of grace, even though it is hidden from perhaps the vast majority of humanity, for a specifically Christian reason. It is not a reflection of an optimistic view of human nature.

Nor is it, in my view, as some friends of Barth might want to suggest, the consequence of a theological prioritising of the human subject. It is driven instead, by this fundamental conviction about the universal salvific will of God. Underlying this whole line of thought is the presupposition of a universal and supernatural salvific will of God which is really operative in the world. This implies the possibility of a supernatural revelation of faith everywhere and hence throughout the whole length and breadth of the history of the human race.

Now, as with the earlier discussion of Barth, this set of ideas raises a range of very important doctrinal, exegetical and conceptual questions. Again for present purposes, I want simply to draw attention to the fact and consequences of Rahner’s appropriation of Christianity’s axiomatic identity of Jesus Christ with the ways, purposes and identity of God. It is this identity which allows him to speak not only of God’s radical and gracious orientation to humanity, but also of humanity’s universal orientation to God, and of the universal possibility of a human response to God.

The Difference between the Reservations and the Affirmations

What explains the differences between these strong affirmations of the universality of God’s grace on the one hand, and the clear reservations about *apokatastasis* on the other? Why not simply affirm universal salvation? Why halt at this doctrine when everything about their theologies seem to point to it?

Barth halts at *apokatastasis* not at all because he places any limits on the grace of God, but because a definitive theological affirmation of this doctrine would risk denying precisely that divine freedom wherein the possibility of *apokatastasis* is grounded: “Just as the gracious God does not need to elect or call any single man, so He does not need to elect or call all mankind.” To some extent Barth’s concern here is that the church will replace the revelation of God in Jesus Christ with the idea or principle of universal salvation. In a recent major study of this aspect of Barth’s theology, Tom Gregg has written, “Barth’s rejection of the category of universal salvation is a rejection of any approach to theology in which principle replaces Christ as a person.” By failing to resist such a displacement of Christ, the idea of universal salvation could be abstracted from the revelation in Jesus Christ and thus could potentially occupy the same logical place as the abstract idea of God’s power did in the double decree. As an idea it could be justified on grounds derived elsewhere than from the will of God revealed in Jesus Christ.

Whether or not Barth is thus rightly – or helpfully – described as a ‘universalist’ is likely to remain open to debate. Logical consistency may well appear to invite the conclusion that he is. Yet, another impulse – towards theological consistency – is also at work in Barth: that is the impulse to keep Jesus Christ central. It is precisely in order to preserve the theological centrality of that

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32 Rahner’s work has long been subject to this criticism, which also takes the form of the charge that he prioritised philosophy over theology. For an influential critique see, Paul D. Molnar, “Can We Know God Directly?” Rahner’s Solution from Experience", *Theological Studies* 46 (1985), 228-261. In my view, Karen Kilby has successfully defended Rahner’s prioritising of theology and the givenness of the Christian gospel in her *Karl Rahner: Theology and Philosophy*, (London: Routledge, 2004).

33 Rahner, Foundations, 313.

34 Barth, CD II/2, p. 417.


which makes universal salvation a possibility that he halts at the idea of a universal salvation. It is not the hope of universal salvation which grounds the church’s proclamation, but the gracious will of God to be for humanity.

Arguably Rahner’s position is more straightforward. His theological consistency is more immediately apparent. The classification of “universalist” would be more forced in Rahner’s case than it would be even if it did apply to Barth. 37 Rahner is consistent because he more clearly distinguishes than Barth does between the offer of grace which is unequivocally universal and the role which he gives to human freedom. The offer of grace to every human being is certain and guaranteed. But Rahner cannot provide such a guarantee about the human response because to do so would be to deny the very freedom which characterizes, even constitutes, this graced human existence. The triumph of grace is assured — but that assurance cannot relieve the human being of the obligation freely to respond to grace. So, the human being is “forbidden ... to take the sure triumph of grace in the world as providing himself with already fixed and acquired points in his estimation of an existence which is still to be lived out in the boldness of freedom.” 38

What Is to be Learnt from this Comparison?

Both theologians help us to see that grace is not confined. That they halt at apokatastasis is not because of any narrowing of the extent of God’s grace. They vary as do so for other reasons: avoiding presumption; preserving the freedom of God; and not substituting a theological principle for the revelation of God’s grace. As indicated at the outset of this paper, however, the exploration of the respective positions of Barth and Rahner on apokatastasis also provides windows into two other related issues. The first is the issue of human freedom.

In Barth, so it prima facie appears, the human is the object of the sovereign decree of God even if the decree is unequivocal and unequivocally gracious. The problem of a triumphant and arbitrary sovereignty could be taken to have simply been shifted elsewhere. In Rahner, so it prima facie appears, the human possesses an autonomy which seems to be on an equal footing with God’s grace. The freedom to reject or accept God’s grace appears to be absolute. At first sight it might appear that we are here presented with simply another instance of a contrast between a conventional Reformed emphasis on the sovereignty of God and a conventional Catholic emphasis on human responsibility. But there is more common ground that at first appears — and it exists precisely because of the priority of God’s grace in both theologians.

The priority of grace means that neither author is working with abstract concepts of either divine sovereignty or of human freedom. If Barth is explicit in his resistance to an abstract concept of divine sovereignty, both Barth and Rahner resist abstract concepts of human freedom. The result is that in neither author do human and divine agencies compete with each other as absolute alternatives. For Barth it is only a false freedom which would think itself swamped by a gracious divine sovereignty: “The only freedom that means something is the freedom to be myself as I am created by God. God did not create a neutral creature, but His Creature.” 39 For Rahner it is only a false freedom which would think itself genuinely free in saying no to God.

The human ‘no’ to God ... entails a free self-destruction of the subject and intrinsic contradiction ... For this reason, then, this ‘no’ must never be understood as a parallel possibility of freedom alongside the possibility of a ‘yes’ to God. This ‘no’ ... is something which is self-destructive and self-contradictory. 40

37 A more complete account of Rahner’s ideas around this issue would require attention to his important reflections on the hermeneutics of eschatological statements and the distinctly Catholic matters of post-mortem existence. For recent critical studies around these issues see Linus Ibeke, The Universality of Salvation in Jesus Christ in the Thought of Karl Rahner (Würzburg: Echter Verlag, 2006) and Morwenna Ludlow, Universal Salvation: Eschatology in the Thought of Gregory of Nyssa (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).


40 Rahner, Foundations, 102.
These might be thought to be fairly conventional Christian responses to the relationship between sovereign grace and human freedom. But there is an edge to their rhetoric around these issues. Not only is each author self-consciously correcting his own tradition. Each is also deeply aware of the challenges of modern accounts of human freedom. Each in his own way is seeking to resist modernity’s propensity to human absolutism. Therefore the idea of the gracious election of humanity, and the idea of graced human existence can both be appropriated as moments of Christian resistance to the ideologies of modernity.

The second issue into which their views of apokatastasis are a window is that of the distinctively Christian understanding of God. The intensity with which each author stresses the grace of God, and the self-consciousness of their corrective to their respective traditions is noteworthy and warrants some comment. What is it that brings forth this rich language about the grace of God? What propels this emphasis on the triumph of God’s grace? I would propose that it is closely related to each theologian’s re-discovery of the distinctiveness of the Christian idea of God. Both were self-consciously post-Christendom theologians, and their respective attempts to re-state the faith in this context drove them back to the fundamental claims of the Christian faith and its affirmation that God is love. If each theology has a momentum towards apokatastasis this is not as evidence of theological tolerance or modern pluralism. To the contrary, Barth and Rahner believe what they do about this ‘unconfined’ grace precisely because of specifically Christian beliefs. In an age where appeals to Christian specificity often narrow the horizon of the Christian vision, an age where we are prone to an enculturated embarrassment about Christian particularity, Barth and Rahner remind us that Christianity at its deepest source – the revelation of God in Jesus Christ – proclaims a gracious God who does not limit the divine grace but whose unconfined grace is for the whole world.\(^4\)

\(^4\) This emphasis on the link between apokatastasis and Christian particularity is a major theme of Gregg’s treatment of Barth in *Barth, Origen and Universal Salvation*. I would argue that it applies equally to Rahner.

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Chapter 8

The Uniqueness of Jesus Christ and the *Preamble*

paragraph 3

Wes Campbell

The First Peoples had already encountered the Creator God before the arrival of the colonisers; the Spirit was already in the land revealing God to the people through law, custom and ceremony. The same love and grace that was finally and fully revealed in Jesus Christ sustained the First Peoples and gave them particular insights into God’s ways.\(^1\)

Introduction

The uniqueness of Jesus Christ has come under scrutiny in the discussion concerning the new Preamble of the Uniting Church’s *Constitution*. In this essay, I recall the discussion in the twentieth century concerning Jesus Christ’s uniqueness, particularly as it bears on the “historical Jesus” and apply it to paragraph 3 of the new Preamble. I draw two theological themes “revelation” and “natural theology” into the discussion, along with the third paragraph of the *Basis of Union*. This is a crucial discussion, as it bears on the accusation that the *Preamble* has erred fundamentally and has given up the centrality of Jesus Christ. By contrast, I attempt a sympathetic “listening” to the new paragraph 3.

\(^1\) Paragraph 3 of the new *Preamble* of the *Constitution* of the Uniting Church in Australia.