

A Reformed Critique of the Role of Natural Law in Rahnerian Apologetics

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Introduction

It would not be an overstatement to say that Karl Rahner was the most influential Roman Catholic theologian of the 20th century. Rahner had a massive influence in several theological disciplines such as systematics, ethics, epistemology and apologetics. It is my intention to compare and contrast the theology of Karl Rahner with traditional Reformed theology in order to demonstrate the impact theological and philosophical systems have upon apologetic methodologies. Point by point, Rahner illustrates a departure from Reformed orthodoxy, and naturally, arrives at a very different apologetic methodology.

For the sake of brevity, I will be assuming and defending the apologetic system of Cornelius Van Til. While the apologetic methodology of Cornelius Van Til has been demonstrated to be utterly consistent with his theological system,¹ a similar though relative claim could perhaps be made for Karl Rahner.² In so far as I am able to provide a Reformed critique of natural law in Rahnerian apologetics, incidentally I will be demonstrating the disparate results obtained by consistently applying different points of departure.

Natural law has been a debated subject in Reformed circles for the last several decades. I believe that natural law has a proper place within the Van Tillian tradition. However, the role and efficacy of natural law and any theology based upon it must not be overstated, but situated properly within a doctrine of revelation and anthropology that accounts for the noetic effects of sin. It should also be noted that many Roman Catholic theologians, including Pope John Paul II,

¹ K. Scott Oliphint, *The Consistency of Van Til's Methodology* (Scarsdale, N.Y.: Westminster Discount Book Service, 1990).

² While Rahner's theological system is consistent relative to other unbelieving systems of thought, it is my conviction that only the system espoused by orthodox Reformed theology is truly consistent. Every unbelieving system of thought presupposes elements of orthodox Christianity in order to make sense of their own.

have raised serious concerns regarding Rahnerian theology, particularly the practical aspect to its ethical system.³ While neither Van Til nor Rahner are representatives of the entire Reformed or Roman Catholic populations, respectively, I am convinced a Van Tillian critique of Rahnerian apologetics is a worthwhile endeavor that can assist in isolating the theological and philosophical presuppositions behind many other apologetic approaches.

Theological Foundations

Anthropology

Rahner's theology is a composition of Kantian, Hegelian⁴ and Heideggerian⁵ philosophy. Rahner appropriates and builds upon the insights of Kant in using his noumenal-phenomenal distinction. Kant, however, had no method for the noumenal to enter into the phenomenal. Karl Barth attempted to solve this problem in Kantian philosophy by claiming that God, who resides in *geschichte* (corresponding to the noumenal), breaks through into *historie* (corresponding to the phenomenal) in a revelational event. For Barth the direction is God to man. Rahner, however

³ Brian Linnane, "Ethics," in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Rahner* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 162.

⁴ Hegel greatly influenced Rahner's Christology. In the incarnated Word, God and man synthesize into one. This is what Rahner calls a *real symbol*, that is one that does not simply point to the relationship between God and man, but actualizes and intensifies it. The incarnation acts as a guarantee, as it were that mankind will be brought up into the God. In other words, mankind is the antithesis corresponding to God as the thesis and will be divinized as part of the resulting synthesis.

⁵ Rahner considered Joseph Maréchal, a Belgian philosopher and Jesuit, to be his biggest influence. Rahner brought Maréchal's insights into his study of Heidegger. James C. Livingston et al., *Modern Christian Thought: The Twentieth Century*, 2nd ed. (Fortress Press, 2006), 206.

sees man as the infinitely open receiver to God's revelation. By incorporating elements of Martin Heidegger's existentialism, Rahner is able to bridge the noumenal-phenomenal chasm through his theological anthropology. Man is the *geist in welt* or 'spirit in the world.' He is a spirit, but also an historical entity. Over against Kant, Rahner maintains that the noumenal and phenomenal can be bridged, but the agent is not a God who comes down to the phenomenal such as Barth's, but a humanity who goes up to the noumenal.

Man is first and foremost an existential being or a spirit that is infinitely open to the self-expression of God. He has an inherent dynamism and transcendent orientation toward God.⁶ This orientation necessitates that man is always and everywhere dependent upon the infinite God. Francis Schüssler Fiorenza aptly illustrates Rahner's understanding of this dependence:

One can say that the more one has learned from a capable teacher, for example, in mathematics, philosophy, or music composition, the more one can become an independent and creative mathematician, philosopher, or composer. One who has learned very little can only slavishly imitate the teacher. The dialectic is the more one has learned, the more independent one can become of the teacher.⁷

The human experience is similar in that while a person is dependent upon God, there is a measure of freedom and autonomy that arises out of this dependence due to the fact that the person is finite and God is infinite. The most significant existential categories for Rahner are historicity and self-understanding. Man was created as an inherently historical being with a specific purpose. He introduces the notion of a "supernatural existential" in order to interpret this goal for humanity.⁸ By virtue of this existential orientation, man comes to receive God's

⁶ Mark E. Graham, *Josef Fuchs on Natural Law* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2002), 119.

⁷ James C. Livingston et al., *Modern Christian Thought: The Twentieth Century, 2nd ed.* (Fortress Press, 2006), 208.

⁸ James C. Livingston et al., *Modern Christian Thought: The Twentieth Century, 2nd ed.* (Fortress Press, 2006), 209.

revelation and comes to fulfill his purpose. Consequently for Rahner, one is always and everywhere an active receiver of God's grace because

this kind of self-communication by God to a creature must necessarily be understood as an act of opening himself in ultimate intimacy and in free and absolute love.⁹

Rahner's anthropology is at the heart of his entire system. This transcendental orientation drives Rahner's discussion on several issues and will determine his understanding of natural law and as a result, his apologetic goal and method.

Ethics

In order to illustrate the difference between the Reformed and Rahnerian conceptions of natural law, we must see how Rahner builds on Kant's philosophy of ethics. Examining the foundations of Rahner's ethical system will demonstrate how any moral norm such as natural law can be situated. For Kant the law ultimately arises from the individual because the self imposes an ideal upon the consciousness. As such Kant made reason the source of the moral law. Kant's system is deontological, meaning that duty is at its center. For him,

only the good will is morally valuable; and a good will is simply one that (1) knows what its duty is (that is, knows what reason commands) and (2) does the dutiful act because it is dutiful.¹⁰

For any act to have moral value, it must not only be intended or done, but it must be acted upon a moral principle or a particular kind. The principle must be universally or categorically

⁹ Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* (New York: Seabury Press, 1978), 123.

¹⁰ W. T. Jones, *Kant and the Nineteenth Century, History of Western Philosophy, v. 4* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975), 70.

binding, not simply conditional. Kant thought duty was universally binding.¹¹ The universal law is not created by the individual; rather reason is the ultimate arbiter of what the good actually is. The point of departure for Kant is autonomous reason.

Rahner develops Kant's thought as he develops his anthropology. The law is not simply something that arises from the individual's reason in the phenomenal realm. God is the source of an absolute natural law; however this law is actualized and concretized by individuals in history. Rahner not only sees mankind as bridging the gap between noumenal and phenomenal, but also between 'is' and 'ought.'¹² Humanity is the vector for determining moral values in the world. John Calvin, however saw this as the exclusive activity of the Holy Spirit.¹³ For Calvin, the individual does not determine or ultimately recognize law based on his own reason. Neither does the individual simply actualize the natural law in history. Men are charged with being 'receptively reconstructive' to God's moral law in revelation.¹⁴ The proper point of departure for

¹¹ W. T. Jones, *Kant and the Nineteenth Century, History of Western Philosophy*, v. 4 (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975), 73-74.

¹² David Hume presented the is-ought problem or what has come to be known as "Hume's Guillotine." Hume recognized that ethicists often attempt to determine the way things 'ought' to be based on what they actually [or seem to] know (i.e. what 'is').

¹³ Calvin addressed an ought-can problem. The Spirit is the agent through which the believer is united to Jesus Christ. In this union, the believer is able to respond in good works because they are united to the one who fulfilled the law on their behalf. J. Todd Billings, *Calvin, Participation, and the Gift: The Activity of Believers in Union with Christ, Changing Paradigms in Historical and Systematic Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 150. However, he also understood the Holy Spirit as enlightening the regenerate mind so they could understand God's special revelation.

¹⁴ Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Theistic Ethics, In Defense of Biblical Christianity*, v.3 (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980). 22.

natural law in Reformed theology is God's being. As he reveals himself through general and special revelation, his nature is displayed. This is true also for the image of God. By virtue of man's very nature, he displays qualities and characteristics that reveal his Creator. It is man's duty to receive this revelation and subject himself to it as a humble creature rather than as an autonomous being.

Epistemology

Rahner is perhaps most famous for his idea of the 'anonymous Christian.' His anthropology that presents man as the transcendently open recipient of God's revelation and grace is matched with a consistent epistemology. Rahner's epistemology allows him to maintain that any human being is some form of a 'Christian.'

Rahner presents a two-level epistemology. Unthematic knowledge is the knowledge that arises out of transcendental experience. It is vague and subjective and any articulation of it can only reference that transcendental experience.¹⁵ For Rahner, unthematic knowledge is more basic and provides the foundation for thematic knowledge.

Thematic knowledge then is the explicit, categorical knowledge men have of God. It is objective and conceptual. Even though only professing Christians possess thematic knowledge of God as it has been revealed to the Church, all men possess unthematic knowledge. Regardless of the thematic knowledge that comes to expression, by virtue of who he is, man is a 'Christian.' He cannot escape the existential orientation toward God and therefore has some knowledge of him as part of a gracious relationship.

¹⁵ Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* (New York: Seabury Press, 1978), 21.

Though the undergirding structure is vastly different, Rahner's unthematic knowledge can be compared to the knowledge that is suppressed by sin since it bears formal similarities to the reformed understanding of *sensus divinitatus*. Although it is not developed in the categories of existential philosophy, the Reformed affirm a sense of dependence upon God. No one can escape the presence of God and the sense of responsibility that comes by virtue of being in covenant with him.¹⁶ Man knows God, but suppresses the truth in unrighteousness (Rom 1:18). For Rahner, all men have a *sensus divinitatus* but can not necessarily articulate this knowledge in a thematic fashion.

For this reason the meaning of all explicit knowledge of God in religion and in metaphysics is intelligible and can really be understood only when all the words we use there point to the unthematic experience of our orientation towards the ineffable mystery. And just as it is of the nature of transcendent spirit, because it is constituted in an objective world, always to offer along with this objectivity the possibility, both in theory and in practice, of running away from its own subjectivity, from taking responsibility for itself in freedom, so too a person can also hide from himself his transcendental orientation towards the absolute mystery which we call God. As scripture says (Rom. 1:18), he can in this way suppress the most real truth about himself.¹⁷

Unthematic knowledge is inescapable for Rahner. Man can run from thematic, explicit knowledge of God, but he can never escape the transcendental dependence on God and the unthematic knowledge it entails. While Rahner prefers the term 'anonymous Christian,' perhaps 'anonymous truth suppresser' would be more appropriate.

For the Reformed, the immediate knowledge of God is more than just an existential feeling of transcendental dependence. Man's conscience understands the moral will of God because the law is written on his heart (Rom 2). The content of natural law is God's moral will and is

¹⁶ As Van Til would say, man is either a covenant-keeper or a covenant-breaker. One is either in Adam or in Christ.

¹⁷ Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* (New York: Seabury Press, 1978), 53-54.

summarily described in the Decalogue. Calvin describes the function and purpose of natural law in Book II of his *Institutes*.

The purpose of natural law, therefore, is to render man inexcusable. This would not be a bad definition: natural law is that apprehension of the conscience which distinguishes sufficiently between just and unjust, and which deprives men of the excuse of ignorance, while it proves them guilty by their own testimony.¹⁸

In contradistinction to Rahner's unthematic knowledge, this natural law is an objective norm. Though understood through the conscience, it is an objective measure that condemns men before God. Since it finds its source ultimately in God's nature, it is not subject to change through historical or cultural development. The natural law discloses God's being and bears with it a call to imitate him.¹⁹ It is bound up with the image of God and finds expression as it is written on men's hearts. The law is further described and explicated in special revelation and comes to climax in the Incarnate Word, Jesus Christ.

Rahner does recognize the teaching of the First Vatican Council that natural knowledge of God apart from revelation can be attained through the light of reason, but he undergirds this knowledge with the unthematic knowledge of transcendental dependence since it is the fundamental presupposition of his epistemology. He distinguishes himself from traditional Thomistic thought on this point when he states that

the *concrete* process of the so-called natural knowledge of God in either its acceptance or its rejection is always more than a merely natural knowledge of God. This is true when

¹⁸ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990), 2.2.22.

¹⁹ Micah 6:8 illustrates this point as it describes what is required by God. The covenantal nature of the language used carries with it the sense that God requires man to be like Him. The description of what it means to be like Him is intimately connected to reformed anthropology.

the knowing takes place unthematically in the basic and original self-interpretation of human existence as well as when it is reflexive, thematic knowledge.²⁰

The Reformed tradition maintains that God has revealed himself in the natural world and that natural knowledge of God is possible. The immediate knowledge that all men have of God is mediated through nature and man's internal constitution.²¹ Cornelius Van Til affirmed that

Man is internally certain of God's existence only because his sense of deity is correlative to the revelation of God about him. And all the revelation of God is clear.²²

Man's internal knowledge of God always corresponds to something outside him, namely, God's perspicuous revelation. Though natural knowledge of God is possible, the Fall into sin has seriously affected humanity's ability to interpret this natural revelation. Reason is used as a tool, but it must be acknowledged that this tool, in the hands of a sinner, is always misguided.

As creatures made in God's image man cannot help but know God. It is this revelation *to* man through "nature" and through his own constitution that Paul speaks of in Romans. But as I have always *affirmed* the fact that all men, even the most wicked of men, have this *knowledge* so I have always *denied* that fallen man's *interpretation of this revelation* to him is *identical* with the revelation itself. *Natural revelation must not be identified with natural theology.*²³

Natural revelation as well as natural law have an epistemic role in Reformed theology. However, the noetic effects of sin have severely hindered their place in apologetics. The disparate conceptions of revelation and epistemology between Reformed and Rahnerian apologetics will be further exaggerated as the systems are enacted in practice.

²⁰ Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* (New York: Seabury Press, 1978), 57.

²¹ Greg L. Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic: Readings & Analysis* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1998), 184.

²² Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1955), 196.

²³ Cornelius Van Til. *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1969), 301 (emphasis original).

Implications for Apologetic Methodology

The Fundamental Option and the Antithesis

The anthropology proposed by Rahner has apologetic methodological implications. It affects several apologetic elements such as the antithesis, point of contact, and the purpose of apologetic encounter. Rahner's conception of the 'fundamental option' and the Reformed doctrine of antithesis further illustrate the potential use of natural law in the apologetic encounter. The problem of apologetics for Reformed theologians traditionally has been overcoming the antithesis by finding a point of contact between believer and unbeliever. While it may not be evident to those only acquainted with Rahner's 'anonymous Christianity,' an antithesis obtains between those whom have made a fundamental option for God and those whom have rejected Him. Rahner writes

[E]veryone, really and radically every person must be understood as the event of a supernatural self-communication of God, although not in the sense that every person necessarily accepts in freedom God's self-communication to man. Just as man's essential being, his spiritual personhood, in spite of the fact that it is and remains an inescapable given for every free subject, is given to his freedom in such a way that the free subject can possess himself in the mode of "yes" or in the mode of "no," in the mode of deliberate and obedient acceptance or in the mode of protest against this essential being of his which has been entrusted to freedom, so too the existential of man's absolute immediacy to God in and through this divine self-communication as permanently offered to freedom can exist merely in the mode of an antecedent offer, in the mode of acceptance and in the mode of rejection.²⁴

Behind the thematic expressions lies a fundamental option that differentiates humanity into two groups. Brian Linnane provides a helpful and concise definition of Rahner's fundamental option.

²⁴ Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* (New York: Seabury Press, 1978), 127-128.

A fundamental option, then, has been shown to be a free, moral action in history that is also always an event of love, expressing the person's ultimate self-realization by means of an absolute commitment of the freedom encountered in the experience of transcendence.²⁵

Men are always faced with the decision to either accept or reject God's free offer of self-communication. But where Rahner casts the antithesis in existential categories, the Reformed have understood it in covenantal categories. Every individual is faced with a decision, but the decision is between remaining in Adam or salvation by faith in Jesus Christ as a new covenant head. The Reformed 'fundamental option' would be the choice between the first and second Adam.

As with Rahner, Reformed theology holds to the concept of an ever present confrontation between God's communication and humanity. The point of contact in Reformed apologetics is the image of God. All men are created in God's image and have innate and immediate knowledge of their Creator. Man is always and everywhere faced with God's revelation. As image of God, he himself is revelation. After the Fall into sin men suppress the truth in unrighteousness thus rejecting God.²⁶

Rahner understands natural revelation as God's gracious self-communication desiring to be heard and received. This implies the importance of the human receiver in the act of revelation. While God is in fact revealing himself to his people, the Reformed understand revelation to be complete even without a human receiver. God is not dependent upon the receiver in revealing himself. Moreover, the Reformed understand natural man as totally depraved and unable to

²⁵ Brian Linnane, "Ethics," in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Rahner* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 161.

²⁶ Van Til understood all knowledge to be ethical. Every act of knowing had at its root either an attitude of humble dependence upon God as Creator or a willful rejection of God and a brazen autonomy.

make a 'positive fundamental option' apart from the regenerative work of the Holy Spirit. Reformed theology has no tolerance for Rahner's existential freedom.

Furthermore, Rahner decouples a person's outward or thematic actions with his or her fundamental option. In seeking to answer difficult questions such as the condemnation of unevangelized peoples, Rahner introduces opacity into determining an individual's fundamental option. The epistemological divide between thematic and unthematic knowledge make it difficult, if not impossible, to know in thematic categories what fundamental option one has made in unthematic experience. This skepticism regarding the fundamental option bears upon the apologetic encounter.

The Apologetic Encounter

Rahner developed a pluralistic notion of religion. For him, all men have some level of objectification of the truth. This leads him to an apologetic purpose far from the sense that Reformed theology has understood it. In apologetics, the Christian's role is to dialogue with unbelievers (more specifically less-thematic believers) in order to provide a more complete objectification of Christianity to others. The Christian has the highest level of objectification, but must come into apologetic dialogue with unbelievers so that he or she might learn from them and perhaps incorporate elements of their truth system into his or her own. Rahner describes this interaction:

This name [anonymous Christian] signifies that this fundamental actuation of a man, like all actuations, cannot and does not want to stop in its anonymous state but strives toward an explicit expression, towards its full name. An unfavourable historical environment may impose limitations on the explicitness of this expression so that this actuation may not exceed the explicit appearance of a loving humaneness, but it will not act against this

tendency whenever a new and higher stage of explicitness is presented to it right up to the ultimate perfection of a consciously accepted profession of Church membership.²⁷

Though salvation is present to all men, the unthematic or ‘anonymous’ Christian still desires the more explicit objectification of the truth of Christianity. When presented with this more explicit objectification, the ‘anonymous’ Christian will prefer it to his or her former beliefs. Rahner’s apologetic is not strictly a defense of the faith against unbelief, but a teaching and supplementing of the unbeliever’s implicit understanding of Christianity.²⁸ The anonymous Christian clearly has something to learn, but the apologetic encounter is a learning opportunity for the apologist as well. James Bresnahan explains that a

consequence of Rahner's theological reflection for Christian ethics is that an openness to, and active dialogue with, extra-Christian ethical reflection is demanded by it. The articulation of extra-Christian ethics, even where for historical reasons it appears to be positively anti-Christian, can enrich Christian ethics. It will always remain an open question whether the particular insights or the general approach of a Buddhist or Marxist ethics may not have articulated, in 'objective' form, certain aspects of the universal Christian inner experience that improves upon available categories within historical Christian ethics.²⁹

The Rahnerian apologist always has something to learn from unbelieving thought. The apologist must always be open to incorporating aspects of non-Christian articulations of ‘certain

²⁷ Karl Rahner, “Anonymous Christians,” in *Theological Investigations, VI* (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1969), 395.

²⁸ This approach is in stark contrast to that of Cornelius Van Til. Van Til always sought to defend the entire system of truth embodied in Scripture. Unbelievers did not possess partial truth of Christianity, they were at odds with Christianity at every point even if certain aspects bore formal similarity. Van Til’s goal in the apologetic encounter was a one-way wholesale replacement of theological system whereas Rahner’s is a two-way partial supplementation.

²⁹ James F. Bresnahan, “Rahner's Christian Ethics,” in *America* (October 31, 1970).

aspects of the universal Christian inner experience.’ Linnane uncovers the fundamental critique of the arrangement in Rahner’s system.

At the most basic level, Rahnerian moral reflection, like all of Rahner’s theology, is grounded in a commitment to the primacy of the subject’s experience of God as holy and gracious mystery.³⁰

Experience takes precedence for Rahner because his anthropology is at the core of his system. The idea that experience is the most basic category in ethical consideration is squarely at odds with a Reformed understanding that natural law is an objective norm from God. This point manifests the latent Kantianism that influences Rahner’s ethics. For him, the universal objective norm of God’s law cannot be disclosed to humanity in the sense that Reformed theology has articulated it. Rahner cannot even concur with traditional Roman Catholic theology for that matter. His anthropology provides the answer to the problem of objective norms residing in the noumenal realm. Since man is the transcendental ‘spirit in the world’ and ‘hearer of the word’ he acts as the bridge from the noumenal to the phenomenal and becomes the agent that discovers natural law in history. By making free moral choices humanity actualizes the absolute natural law in concrete historical circumstances. Therefore, the natural law that men know is conditioned and applicable to the particular cultures in history that actualized it.³¹ If no objective norms are available to the apologist, true *apologia* cannot exist for there is nothing to defend.

The condemning aspect of natural law has found wide acceptance among Reformed theologians. God, through his common grace, does restrain sin, but the natural law written on

³⁰ Brian Linnane, “Ethics,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Rahner* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 163.

³¹ It would be unfair to say that Rahner’s system is fully relativistic. I am drawing what I see as a logical conclusion to his theology. The subjective and pragmatic elements in Rahner’s view of natural law inevitably result in some form of relativism.

men's hearts helps to restrain sin as well. Natural law condemns and can therefore be appealed to as part of a persuasive apologetic argument. The goal of the apologetic encounter is first and foremost an accurate presentation of the Word of God. It should accompany a proclamation of the gospel and a call to faith and repentance in Jesus Christ. But as an additional element of persuasion, the apologist may appeal to the guilty conscience. This, of course, must be part of the entire apologetic 'package.' Since, a guilty conscience can be explained in any number of ways by other worldviews it must be situated in a consistent apologetic system. That being said, the negative aspect of natural law does not need to be eschewed by the Reformed apologist. If special revelation is not maintained as the only reliable interpreter of natural law, we must retreat to some form of ethical skepticism.³²

Naturally, Rahner's fundamental option begs the question as to what is the standard for making an absolute commitment to the freedom encountered in transcendental experience. The standard of action in Reformed theology is God's being who in turn has revealed himself and his will through general and special revelation. Rahner, making his theological foundation

³² Rahner seeks to reject any notion of a wooden natural law that has to be forced upon delicate historical and cultural situations. He maintains that while one ethical maxim may be true in a particular place and time, it may not apply in another. Rahner uses his anthropology to solve this apparent difficulty. Cornelius Van Til illustrates this point when he writes that

If it be objected that the Bible clearly does not say anything about the problems of the day, we reply that this is not really true. The bible does say something about every problem that we face if only we learn the art of fitting to our situation that which Scripture offers either in principle or example.

Van Til can hold to an objective natural law with Scripture as its only reliable interpreter without having to posit a wooden law that is shoe-horned into every situation. Through his use of application, Van Til avoids Rahner's inevitable relativism and maintains his orthodox theology and anthropology. Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Theistic Ethics, In Defense of Biblical Christianity*, v.3 (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980). 27.

anthropology, must allow human experience to interpret or even determine natural law.

Consequently Rahner's standard ultimately resides in man himself.

Man acts in transcendental freedom according to his own considerations. It is a subjective action and cannot be measured according to any objective norm. The Reformed apologist can use natural law as an objective measure for determining the moral value of an action so long as the objective natural law is interpreted by special revelation and can measure an unbeliever's actions and beliefs according to these objective standards. Rahnerian theology cannot allow for any such objective measurement. While the Reformed apologist has warrant for calling an unbeliever to faith and repentance in Jesus Christ, the Rahnerian apologist never truly knows who has the more explicit objectification of truth. Rahnerian apologetics erodes the apologist's confidence.

Conclusion

Rahner, building a theological system upon Kant, Heidegger and Hegel has articulated a consistent system,³³ though the entire project is at odds with Reformed orthodoxy. The differing points of departure for Rahner have led him to a vastly different apologetic methodology. As has been shown, Rahner's apologetic is better understood as a dialogue than a defense. While Rahner's system is consistent, it fails to provide a proper role for natural law. The Reformed maintain a place for an objective norm that can have a positive role in the apologetic encounter. Rahner, at best, leaves the apologist with a timid uncertainty. The Rahnerian apologist cannot engage with confidence because he never truly knows what level objectification of Christian truth he is encountering. By rooting his system in anthropology rather than theology, Rahner's

³³ Again, this consistency should be seen as relative in comparison to other unbelieving systems of thought.

apologetic is principally misguided. By rooting a system in a Reformed doctrine of God, the Van Tillian apologist espouses an apologetic method consistent with a God who ultimately needs no man to defend him.

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