The ‘Other’ in Karl Rahner’s Transcendental Theology and George Khodr’s Spiritual Theology

Within the Near Eastern Context

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EXTRACT
I. Introduction and General Methodological Remarks

Various questions might come to mind when one reads the title of this work: “The ‘Other’ in Karl Rahner’s Transcendental Theology and in George Khodr’s Spiritual Theology within the Near Eastern Context”. Reading the title, one may ask: Who is the ‘Other’? What factors really make the ‘Other’? What about Rahner’s transcendental Theology and its relation to non-Christians? Is there anything left to say about Rahner’s ‘Anonymous Christian’ after all the discussions about it? What about Khodr’s spiritual theology and its relevance to the Near Eastern context? Why this topic today? Isn’t it possible for the Near East to concentrate on its own theology regardless of the ‘Other’? What benefit is there for the theology of the Near East, or what benefit is there for the ‘Other’, from relating the two together?

I come from a context in which both Christians and Muslims live together (the Near East). As we reach the end of the first decade of the 21st century, having already almost fourteen centuries of Christian-Muslim relations behind us, there is still need to go into the question of the ‘Other’ in depth theologically, since for Near Eastern Christianity throughout these centuries Islam has remained the ‘Other’. Even though Christians and Muslims shared the common life experience in the Arab world, yet this could not move the doctrinal rigidity of either side. While in the West, where in the nineteenth century Eastern Studies appeared and developed, the traditional doctrinal approach concerning world religions remained nonetheless unmoved.1

The question that is particularly important for the present work is the possibility for Christian Theology to be open to hearing the ‘Other’, to be enriched by the theology of the ‘Other’ and, being enlightened by encountering the ‘Other’, to accept even self-correction and change. It is the willingness to rethink and restate one’s own faith claims as the result of meeting the ‘Other’.


Reflecting on Christian-Muslim relations, one might note the several Muslim contributions throughout centuries in different areas of Western civilization, from which, however, religion is rarely an issue that is undertaken. It was only after the middle of the twentieth century that Judaism and Islam were thoroughly studied in Western Christendom. See: W.A. Bijlefeld, “Christian-Muslim Relations: A Burdensome Past, a Challenging Future” Word & World, vol. XVI, num. 2, 1996, pp. 122, 126; R. Casper, Pour un regard chrétien sur l’Islam, (Paris: Centurion, 1990).
This is to say that one is to consider equally the seriousness of one’s own faith claims, as well as the openness to change. Is this ever possible for a Christian believer (or even a Muslim believer), who believes that he/she has received the truth mediated through inspired, final writings? And if yes, on what theological bases is such a claim to be founded? In more general terms I want to ask: can Christian Theology consider itself and the ‘Other’ without regarding its own as better or as higher than the ‘Other’s? Is God to be found within the limits of a certain religion, an ideology, or a claim of truth, which disregards the ‘Other’, or rather exterminates it, so that its own truth is revealed? Is it appropriate for Christianity to claim its own truth and the unique reality of God and God’s salvific work through Jesus Christ, while referring to the falsehood of other claims of faith? Or is it possible to assume or conceive of the possibility for the non-Christian religions to know and experience God outside of explicit Christianity? Can Christianity come out of the theological limitations that are the outcome of relative historical details, while remaining faithful to the Gospel message?

In the beginning of the twenty-first century it is a necessity to think about a possible Christian theology, especially in the East, that has a place for the ‘Other’. This is in fact essential to survival, not only because the ‘Other’ has become part of one’s own existential reality, but also for the sake of a future Christian theology. Do the metaphysical models of the past and the ontological speculations of religion have any further role in shaping the Christian faith in the Near East, or it is possible for critical thinking, consciousness and reason to take the leading role in knowing oneself and the ‘Other’?

Accepting the theological differences of the ‘Other’ is already a compelling need in the East. In addition, an awareness of a kind of inner arrogance in the Christian theological position is needed. Yet, this requires serious struggle with one’s own beliefs, traditions and theological foundation so that a true self-encounter, a new perspective and a better prospect for Christian theology may be possible, which does not just make a place for the ‘Other’, but rather makes a

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genuine human and divine disclosure possible with and through the ‘Other’. One has to say that many attempts have already been made in this direction in the East, especially in the context of Christian-Muslim dialogue; nevertheless a theological presentation of the question is needed. Such a theological inquiry does not intend simply to advance the dialogue between the different religions, which sometimes takes the form of a superficial kind of theological agreement between the different sides, but rather the present inquiry aims to make a genuine inner turn to the ‘Other’ possible.

Under this theme of a possible theological standpoint toward the ‘Other’ I have chosen to deal with Karl Rahner’s transcendental theology and George Khodr’s Orthodox theology as two theological positions that possess great potential for a future Christian theology. The reason behind my engagement with the thought of both Rahner and Khodr is nothing other than these same questions, that both Rahner and Khodr were stimulated to write about, which still stimulate contemporary Christian thought and theology.

4. Some other Near Eastern contributions in the field of Theology of Religions, particularly with regard to the Christian-Muslim interfaith dialogue are the following:
Hence, in this study I argue that both K. Rahner and G. Khodr present two profound theological models, according to which every human being, the Christian and the non-Christian, is given supernatural energies and potentials of transcendentality and transformation that is far beyond all natural human experiences and understandings. Every person is accordingly the event of God’s self-communication, regardless of the human free response to the divine initiative. Thus, it is helpful to approach the works of both Rahner and Khodr as two theological patterns, as each represents in a certain way the common Christian worldview of its own community and church tradition. By analyzing the works of both theologians and reflecting on their writings critically, I will consider the two patterns in relation to the contemporary questions that Christian theology faces and needs to address. In addition, while being aware of the two different theological contexts to which both theologians belong, I maintain that there are an inner coherence and common theological assumptions behind the two theological models.

Along with Rahner and Khodr I will discuss the works of several Western and Eastern thinkers, who, either directly or indirectly, present critiques of what Rahner and Khodr suggest, particularly in reference to their theological position concerning the ‘Other’. It is through interaction with the philosophical and the ‘pluralist’ critiques that theology can be faithful to reality itself. Hence, the works of Heinz Robert Schlette, A.U. von Balthasar, Hans Küng, John Hick, Moushir Aoun and Paul Khoury will enrich the present study, as their contributions shed light on some particular aspects, so that the main topic may be further elucidated and clarified.

Before making particular remarks about the different parts of the work, it will be helpful to clarify the general methodology used in building the argumentation of this work. Throughout the different parts of the study, I first present the thought and the theology of the particular author in an expository form. In this way the theology of the author can speak for itself and its claims and values may fairly be revealed to the reader. In a second stage and through an effort to bring the particular theology into dialogue with the contemporary questions related to the present topic, I move to an analytical-critical methodology. The critical approach is a basic element of the present work, since through it I try to identify what is missing for a possible and relevant theology that has a place for the ‘Other’, reconstructing the argumentation in a way that is faithful to the theology of the different authors and to the purpose of this study. Hence, I seek to elaborate, ascertain and evaluate the theological positions of Karl Rahner and George Khodr so
that through their contributions a Christian theology is foreseeable, in which the ‘Other’ holds an essential position, even in knowing oneself and God.

Further, the form of the whole theological argumentation can be described as foundational, since it raises the question of a starting point for theology. It is, implicitly, also philosophical in that it analyses the different theological affirmations and the presupposed elements of the human situation.

I will proceed in the main parts of this study as follows. Following this introduction, Part II, “Karl Rahner’s Transcendental Theology and his ‘Anonymous Christian’”, will present the thought and theology of the German theologian Karl Rahner, his transcendental theology and a critical evaluation of his famous theory of the ‘Anonymous Christian’.

Having all the history of theological discussions of Rahner’s ‘Anonymous Christian’ and the different critiques of it behind us, nevertheless I have decided to dig into Rahner’s thought, which, I think, carries within itself the seeds for a future Christian theology. His starting point, in theology, with the human being, the possibility of transcendence that enables one to experience the divine grace already given to all, his view of God as Mystery for whom every human soul yearns, the mystic spirituality Rahner had in the background of his thought make his theology worthy of continuous study and investigation. Since Karl Rahner devoted a large amount of his writings to his theory of the ‘Anonymous Christian’, sometimes as separate chapters in many of his volumes, it is consequently impossible for this limited part of the work to present every detail concerning Rahner’s theory. Nevertheless, a critical consideration of the theory will be undertaken here. This part also does not intend to present Rahner’s thought chronologically, considering every historical development in the theology of the author. Rather, some specific theological bases are considered here, which highlight Rahner’s way of regarding the ‘Other’.

In this part I will make use of different methodological approaches. For the first three sections, “Introduction: Karl Rahner (1904-1984)”, “Philosophical-Theological Foundations” and “Rahner’s Transcendental Theology and the Bases for Theology of Religions”, my approach is expository, exploring Rahner’s philosophical and theological bases for his theology of

5. For a chronological presentation of Rahner’s soteriology the following might be a helpful resource: L. Ibekwe, The Universality of Salvation in Jesus Christ in the Thought of Karl Rahner: A Chronological and Systematic Investigation, (Würzburg: Echter Verlag, 2006).
religions, as well as his view of divine grace, salvation and incarnation, which together may be regarded as the foundations of his theology concerning the ‘Other’. For these sections I assume Rahner’s anthropological approach as his starting point that is developed into his transcendental theology.

In the fourth and fifth sections, “Evaluation and the Problem of a Different Starting Point” and “The Suggestion of a New Hermeneutical Key”, my approach is critical. Here I propose that Rahner had a second starting point for most of his ‘theology from above’. How could Rahner bring these two different starting points into one theological construction? Was he successful? Were these contradictory claims, resulting from the two different points of departure, the result of a struggle between what theology on one hand and the Church on the other requires? Which starting point leads to a true understanding of the ‘Anonymous Christian’? How and where in Rahner’s works may one discern the unlimited richness and the theological potentials, concerning the position toward the ‘Other’? Hence I suggest a hermeneutical key based on the differentiation in Rahner’s writings between two different theological motives or claims, based on two different starting points for theology.

In the sixth section, “The ‘Anonymous Christian’ Revisited”, I apply the suggested hermeneutical key to Rahner’s theory. Through an analytical process I suppose two different theological constructions based on the two starting points. Thus, I argue that Rahner’s transcendental theology, rather than the ‘theology from above’, is particularly rich and has enduring value and potential for a contemporary Christian theology that regards all humankind as given the possibility of transcendence and participation in the divine. As the result of the analytical procedure, I argue further that Rahner’s theology of religions is best perceived within the whole context of his transcendental theology, rather than within the ‘Anonymous Christian’. Thus I suggest removing the ‘Anonymous Christian’ from the field of Theology of Religions and replacing it within Christian theology as such.

“The Reception of the ‘Anonymous Christian’ in the West” is the title for the seventh section. My approach here is again expository, while in the last section of Part II, “Final Critical Remarks”, I will discuss the reception of Rahner’s theory in the West critically.

Throughout the different sections of Part II, I also implicitly argue that beside Aquinas, Kant and Heidegger, Rahner’s theology draws on the spiritual heritage of Ignatius of Loyola and on
the theological tradition of the early Fathers of the Church with its claims concerning the divine will of universal salvation. It is Rahner’s appreciation of the spiritual, mystical theology that could bring it out of its segregated system so that it may enrich and renew Christian theology in general. It is this commonality with the theology of the East that makes it possible for Rahner’s theology to address the different cultural religious realities of both East and West. Finally, Rahner’s transcendental theology could replace the speculative, ontological metaphysics with a philosophical and a critical examination of human existence. The very unity of knowing and being makes it possible for the human subject to know God, even unintentionally, since God is the very ground of every being. Hence salvation is possible through one’s own openness, self-determination and self-transcendence toward the divine.

In Part III of this study I will turn to the Lebanese Orthodox Metropolitan, George Khodr, who contributes positively to the topic of this study. In his vast corpus of writings Khodr has mainly addressed his direct Lebanese community, over a period of forty five years. Khodr’s writings reflect profound theological thought, most of which in one way or another address the main concern of this work. Khodr’s theology and his original and unique position concerning the ‘Other’ make his works worthy of consideration and deliberation, particularly in relation to the present subject.6

However, Khodr did not convey his thought through volumes of systematic theology that could elucidate his theology; rather we have from him articles that have appeared weekly in Lebanese newspapers. Khodr’s genre of article writing is very particular and the message behind such a genre is clear: theology is aimless without its ability to reach the common reader. It is through his weekly articles that Khodr reaches the regular reader and claims that the kingdom of God is attainable in one’s daily life. Khodr describes the fall of Lebanese moral values and urges the Lebanese people to reform their moral values before reforming the political and social systems. God does not desire to prepare heaven apart from this world; rather God desires that the divine light might shine in this world. The kingdom of God is to start here, particularly through

6. All translations of references and quotations from the original Arabic are mine, except where noted.
one’s relations with the ‘Other’; otherwise religion and theological doctrines lose their significance and purpose.⁷

As I present Khodr’s thought and theology, with particular concern for his position toward the ‘Other’, the reader will realize that Khodr’s theology finds its roots in the early Patristic heritage of the Eastern Church. Most of Khodr’s theological concepts are shaped by the theology of certain Church Fathers and are colored by the mysticism of Orthodox theology. It is to the very first beginnings and foundations of the Christian faith that Khodr remains faithful. Furthermore, modern Orthodox thought and theology enriches Khodr’s own work. This is to say that in his works Khodr refers many times to the early Church Fathers, using their theology as a foundation for his own claims, while several modern Russian theologians were Khodr’s direct teachers and played an important role in shaping his thought and theology.

My exposition and analysis of Khodr’s thought proceeds in five sections. In the first section, “Introduction: George Khodr (1923- )”, an introduction to Khodr’s life and ministry will be presented. Some of his childhood and youth experiences that left symbolic marks in Khodr’s later thought will be recounted here. The second section is devoted to Khodr’s “Theological Foundations”, which may serve as the framework for his theology of religions. A concise exposition of Orthodox theology will be undertaken here, since Khodr, very much like Rahner in this point, stands within his Church tradition, trying to revive and transform it from within the tradition itself. Some general theological concepts in Khodr’s thought, which can explain and justify Khodr’s view of the ‘Other’, such as the possibility of a cosmic salvation through the divine energies given to all human beings, will be presented. My methodology throughout the first two sections is both expository and constructive, since I will present Khodr’s theological claims, as they appear in most of his articles, and at the same time I will try to build from his claims a theological framework that is faithful to his thought. This is important to be noted here, since nowhere in Khodr’s works can one find a similar theological construction as it appears in this study. Therefore the reader may notice, throughout this part, the concluding remarks I make based on the claims presented by Khodr. Because Khodr’s theological reflections are scattered in form, as was mentioned earlier, especially because of his main genre of article-writing, a particular aim of this work is to gather together the fragments of Khodr’s thought found in his

overlapping articles. While presenting Khodr’s thought, beside the reference to the Church Fathers, reaching to Maximus the Confessor (580-662), several references will be made to modern Russian theologians such as Nikolai Berdyaev (1874-1948) and Vladimir Lossky (1903-1958). These references, to which Khodr points, appear in this study for the sake of clarification and a more complete presentation of the author’s theology. As I present Khodr’s theological foundations, an analytical presentation of the different Christological and Pneumatological patterns employed by Khodr will be given. Which Christological pattern is most essential to Khodr’s thought? How does the possibility in Khodr’s thought of several divine incarnations/manifestations cohere with his claim of the uniqueness of the incarnation of Jesus Christ? Is the distinction between divine essence and energies an ontological one in Khodr’s perspective, or is there consistency or commonality between the essence and the energies? How is the essence-energies distinction related to the theory of creation out-of-nothing? The “Theological Foundations” will be concluded with “Critical Remarks” where these questions will be dealt with critically.

An historical presentation of “Khodr’s Position concerning the ‘Other’”, mainly with reference to Muslims and Jews, will be the purpose of the third section. Here, some of the changes and tensions in Khodr’s theology will be examined and analyzed historically. Further inquiry will also be made to see whether Khodr’s position concerning Islam and Judaism is faithful to his theological claims.

In the fourth section “The Near Eastern ‘Pluralist’ Critique” will be presented through the thoughts of two contemporary Lebanese thinkers, Paul Khoury and Moushir Aoun. Both Khoury and Aoun represent a philosophical-‘pluralist’ position and they are considered pioneers in exemplifying and defending it, within the context of Christian-Muslim dialogue, in the Near East.

Finally, in the last section, “Conclusion: East and West”, I will argue that Khodr, though not a systematic theologian, could make an indispensable contribution to the theological question concerning the ‘Other’, and to Christian theology in the Near East in general. His theological reflections may serve as a paradigm for a constructive Christian theology that has a place for the ‘Other’. Khodr’s main contribution, however, can be stated as the courage to go beyond the borders of what is known as ‘inclusivism’, with both its axioms of salvation as possible only
through Jesus Christ and the universal divine will of salvation. Hence he could provide new horizons within Christian theology itself, making it possible for divine revelation and salvation to reach the ‘Other’, with the Orthodox understanding of both revelation and salvation in mind.

The contribution of Orthodox theology in this study may be understood as an urge to go back to the early beginnings of Christian theology for a possible position concerning the ‘Other’. Thus Christian theology of the first centuries is revisited and reclaimed as an essential, dynamic resource for theology.

No direct reference will be made to Karl Rahner’s theology in Part III. However the reader is to keep Rahner’s transcendental theology in the background of his/her reading. In the fourth part of this study, “Rahner and Khodr: “Theological Anthropology” and Common Theological Sources and Themes”, the common ground and the theological similarities between the theological traditions of both Western Catholic and Eastern Orthodox will be drawn on, in an attempt to discover some possible insights that current Christian theology, particularly in the Near East, can gain from both Rahner and Khodr. The anthropological starting point, the human-divine unity expressed in both traditions, the spiritual aspect of the Christian faith, God’s self-communication given to all human beings and the Christian faith as the actualization of the human freedom are presented here as the inescapable themes for a future theology of religions.

The combination of the Western Catholic and the Eastern Orthodox theologies represented by Rahner and Khodr raises the possibilities of reconciling not only the Christian to the non-Christian but also the West to the East.8

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8. Some of the works that have brought the Eastern and the Western theological traditions together can be mentioned here:

In the final part, “Conclusion: A Possible Christian Theology That Has a Place for the ‘Other’”, some critical remarks will conclude the whole study. Here, all the contributions the different theologians make to this study will be brought together in an attempt to anticipate the kind of direction they offer for a Christian theology in the Near East that has a place for the ‘Other’.

Concerning the value and the intention behind the present work, I need to say that when I speak as a person coming from the Near East, suggesting the need for widening the horizon of our Christian theological spectacles in regard to the ‘Other’, what I have to say carries only as much weight and value as the reasons I can offer as argument for the present work. This is to say that even the thoughts and theologies offered by the selected Eastern thinkers do not present the Near-Eastern Christian approach as a whole, not even the particular Church backgrounds of each of the thinkers. It is also important here to remark that this is a dogmatic presentation of the issue, since the question is posed not as an inquiry into an empirical study of the situation, but rather as a theological inquiry carried out in Dogmatic theology. Nevertheless, some contextualizing efforts will also accompany the theological presentation and argumentation of the present topic, so that theology may be related to its historical and socio-political setting.

To conclude, this study examines the position of several theologians concerning the non-Christian religions, in order to see how, why and to what extent Christian theology can be open to and receptive of the ‘Other’. Throughout the course of my analysis I primarily argue that the contributions of both Rahner’s transcendental theology and Khodr’s Orthodox mystic tradition provide the seeds for a future theology that offers some unlimited potentials and is faithful to the pluralistic world of the present, embracing the different religious experiences of mankind and also the different pluralistic approaches of Christian theology concerning world religions within its horizons. In this I aim to take a step forward in developing a Christian theology, particularly in the East, that has a place for the ‘Other’, a Christian theology that regards followers of all

Several of these works present Rahner’s theology in comparison with the theological heritage of the early Fathers of the Church. Throughout my research I benefitted from M. Ludlow’s insightful work *Universal Salvation: Eschatology in the Thought of Gregory of Nyssa and Karl Rahner*, in which he elaborated widely on the similarities and differences between the thought of Karl Rahner and Gregory of Nyssa concerning eschatology. While a reference to a similar comparison between Rahner’s and Nyssa’s thought is made in the doctoral dissertation by Jessica W. Murdoch, *Foundations of Christian Faith? Karl Rahner’s “Transcendental Hermeneutics” and the Postmodern Critique*. 

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world religions as equal recipients of the gift of sonship and the gift of participation in a true experience of the divine.

Let us see what can be uncovered within these limits that I just have set.