THE THEOLOGICAL NOTION OF THE HUMAN PERSON
A Conversation between the Theology of Karl Rahner and the Philosophy of John Macmurray
Introduction
A Renewed Notion of Person as Relational

People today confess that they are beset by feelings of isolation mixed with a longing to be “connected”.¹ Despite debate and disagreement about the processes involved, there is widespread agreement that the modern and postmodern self has become fragmented.² It is observed that “the postmodern self perceives itself as having lost control as active agent, and as having been transformed into a passive victim of competing groups.”³ In Habits of the Heart, Robert Bellah and others sounded warnings about an unanchored, highly individualised self that occupies postmodern identity.⁴ Isolation, individualism, shifting sense of self and yearning to be “connected” seem to converge in the fractured, post-modern person.

While many people live lives that seem to be dedicated to aspirations beyond themselves, they do so in a culture where the first language has come to revolve so deeply around individualism that they are at a loss to make sense of this other yearning for connectedness.⁵ There is a growing call to reinterpret the notion of the person as relational.

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In contrast to the separate self of modern anthropology, feminist scholars make a case for a view of the self as radically relational, processive and multi-polar. They argue that the illusion of the separate self is bound up with the existence of other dichotomies in the world, such as: the separation of human and ecological relationships, the fragmentation of social connectedness and the call for political interdependence. Similarly, the ecological movement has sounded a clarion call for a more relational construct of the person. According to many ecologists, the critical condition of the earth has been caused in part by an excessive anthropocentricism. Through the modern period, the earth has been perceived to exist solely in the service of humanity and its needs. The resources of nature have been regarded as lifeless matter since the Enlightenment and in consequence have become the “object” of exploitive manipulation by modern science and technology. Those who advocate new cosmologies also complain about the removal of the human from the natural world of creation and argue for the relocation of the human within the context of a new cosmic story. Reimagining the human per-

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son within the context of the Universe has been a significant contribution of post-modern cosmologies.\(^9\)

The human person, according to Thomas Berry, is “that being in whom this grand diversity of the universe celebrates itself in conscious awareness.”\(^10\) That is, there is a sense in which it is true to say human beings “bear the universe in their beings as the universe bears humanity in its being.”\(^11\) These views of person pose a question about the nature or form of the relationship between humanity and the natural world. A theological reflection on person needs to address the question of the most appropriate form of relationality between human beings and the world as a constitutive part of a renewed notion of person.

Over the last thirty years there has been an accumulated weight of research emphasising the relational nature of humanity in preference to the more established, modern anthropology of the independent, autonomous self.\(^12\) The “turn to relationality” has been driven by the growing, widespread and interdisciplinary critique of the independent and

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10 Berry, *Dream of the Earth*, 198. See also Gabriel Daly, *Creation and Redemption* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1988), 2–3.

11 Berry, *Dream of the Earth*, 132.

rational European notion of person, coupled with an intuitive grasp by postmodernists and others that the way forward in understanding persons involves relationality. At the centre of postmodern thinking there is a strong awareness of “otherness” which has been frequently missing or repressed in the narratives of Western civilization.13

Relationality and otherness have also emerged as key elements in a theological notion of person. Dermot Lane reminds theologians that the renewal of anthropology entails attention to the relationship that exists between self and others as an important dialectic within the development of human identity.14 John Teske underlines the psychological importance of calls, such as Lane’s, for a renewed understanding of the crucial role of community in the task of advancing the notion of person and personal identity.15

Paul Ricoeur suggests a way of extending the relational ontology of the human person. He argues that theology needs to broaden the examination of person from “what” is the self to “who” is the self? This signals a shift from the abstract to the concrete, from the universal to the particular, from substance to agency.16 Transposing the question from “what” to “who” expresses a realization that the self is not ultimately merely a “what”, an essence, but a “who”, an identity in a personal context. Moreover, it is argued that this “who” emerges communally rather than in isolation; that is, it emerges with other “whos” and from within a conversation—a conversation with another.17 A key element suggested by Ricoeur in the shift of perspective from “what” to “who” is agency. Since 1968 a vast amount of publications in the field of ana-


lytic philosophy has appeared dealing with the concepts of act, agent and agency. Agency has been under close examination as a significant way of grounding and promoting an understanding of human beings.18

The Argument

Through the writings of Karl Rahner and John Macmurray, I argue for an understanding of the theological notion of person as agent for communion which incorporates relationality and otherness. This argument will be developed through a conversation between Karl Rahner’s theological anthropology and John Macmurray’s philosophical insights into “persons-in-relationship” grounded in his understanding of agency. Independently, both Rahner and Macmurray construct a notion of person as other-centred and relational. For both thinkers, it is in community that persons become themselves fully, freely realising themselves in relationship with other persons. Moreover, both thinkers locate the activity of God as constitutive in being a person and this engagement with God takes place in the loving action that establishes communal relationships. What makes this conversation particularly interesting is that they arrive at this notion of person from very different starting points. Rahner commences his reflections as a theologian with the mystery of God at the heart of his consideration of person. Macmurray begins his work on action, engagement of the other, as the authentic expression of being a person and eventually arrives at a philosophical notion of God as personal, universal agent and constitutive of being a person.

Karl Rahner and John Macmurray both address directly the question of person. Rahner’s seminal works, firmly embedded within the Catholic tradition, demonstrate an early appreciation of the dynamic