Karl Rahner and the Deformed Steel Beam at Herder

The argument that "pastoral theology after Rahner is pastoral theology in the footsteps of Rahner"* (Bucher 2001, p. 184) points both to the importance of a redefinition of the discipline in the middle of the 20th century as well as to Karl Rahner's ability to answer to that need. Therefore, our focus here will be how he saw his handbook both at its inception in 1964 and at the end of its eight year long publishing process in 1972. As the project was initiated by the *Herder* publishing house, we will try to connect Rahner's definition of practical theology to a specific locale, namely the publisher's central office in the city of Freiburg im Breisgau in the South-West of Germany.

In 1960, *Herder* approached Karl Rahner with the idea for a practical-theological handbook. The author was already a contributor to the *Lexicon of Theology and Church*, had recently written on the subject in a well-received volume (Rahner 1959), and seemed to be one of the few prominent theologians willing to undertake the task of conducting such a project. Rahner sketched out his own plans during the summer of 1960 and met with representatives of the publishing house at the end of November the same year (Laumer 2010)[1]. Despite the skepticism from prominent representatives of the discipline of pastoral theology, who were conceiving a similar handbook, and the difficulty to find co-editors, Rahner began work on the project.[2] After several meetings with different rep-

1 See in particular pp. 124-126 (first plans); 127-143 (the foundational draft); 144-154 (the first meeting at Herder in Freiburg).

2 He was later joined by Franz Xaver Arnold, Viktor Schurr, and Leonhard Weber. How wise these choices were is for instance evident in the case of the Tübingen "practical theologian" and later university president Arnold who taught pastoral theology, moral theology, social ethics, liturgy studies, and religious education, and who tried to bridge the gap between systematic and pastoral theology. Gerhard Schneider argues that Arnold conceptualised

resentatives of the publishing house and potential national and international co-authors – he unsuccessfully tried to bring French theologians, among them Marie-Dominique Chenu, on board –, the first volume was released in 1964. The project found its completion with the fourth volume in 1972 to which a fifth lexicon volume was added.

Already in his foundational draft for the representatives of *Herder* in 1960, Rahner emphasised the need for a redefinition of the discipline, independent from the mere practical concern to provide "tactics" for pastors, which was prevalent at the establishment of pastoral theology in Josephinism. He instead concerned himself with the "strategy" for how church as a whole realises itself in the world today (cf. Laumer 2010, pp. 127, 134) and called this an *existential* theology, concerned with the concrete actualisation of God's Word in current times, drawing on the resources of both other theologies and of the modern social sciences (cf. ibid., pp. 130–131). While many authors contributed to the handbook in the end, the theological nexus can be clearly identified with Rahner's definition of the discipline (cf. ibid., p. 273). It is therefore worthwhile to look deeper into the preface of the first volume, published in 1964, and the closing remarks at the end of the handbook's main chapters in the fourth volume, which appeared five years later in 1969. In contrast to the preface, these closing remarks form a whole separate chapter in which Karl Rahner reflects on the developments within Catholicism and religious life in general, arguing already in the heading that *The Future of the Church has Already Begun**. I will not follow textual exegetical methods in this introduction – a close reading e.g. along grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 2008) would surely reveal more insights into the structure and wording of the texts – but single out several topoi which are helpful for the understanding of practical theology in the 1960s and the zeitgeist of that particular era, to which we will come back throughout the book.

Futurology

The preface for the first edition of the handbook – underwritten by all editors – begins by asserting the structural change that has taken place in many parts

pastoral theology as "a discipline related to dogma and history"* (Schneider 2009, p. 16; cf. Schneider 2009, pp. 264–267), being therefore an ideal interlocutor for Rahner.

of the world and which reminds the church to fundamentally reflect "on its concrete ministry in the changing world"* (Rahner 1970, p. 5). Likewise, the first section of the closing chapter begins with the statement that the times are changing. But in this final section Rahner does not only remind the reader of the difficulties to produce a handbook of a discipline in the midst of epochal shifts but also argues that our understanding of time and temporality has changed. While in former times ancestry and tradition had a strong bearing on the present, in the current times, i.e. the 1960s, the outlook on the future determines our existence:

> As much as such a future with all planning and scientific futurology remains an unknown future, as much as all progress and planning bring forth factors of uncertainty, as much as ancestry and tradition remain essential existentialities of human existence, the fact is that man today has a radically different relation to the future than a man of former times. […][H]e legitimises his presence through the future, which he plans, and not through his ancestry, and thus rightly is under the impression that the future has already begun and that such a statement is not a contradiction anymore.* (Rahner 1969, p. 744)

What holds true for man in general also holds true for the church and the discipline of practical theology as represented in the handbook:

> Everything that has been said in these volumes has only meaning and fruition in as much as it can account for the church of the future, notwithstanding that the church in being and history has no other norm than Jesus Christ, who has already been crucified and has risen, but as such is the one that is yet to come.* (ibid., p. 745)

Practical theology's task is to identify in the present the moments where this future of the church has already begun. It is futurology in essence.

Planning

Practical theology also provides a reflection of the instruments and practices with which the church addresses the future. In the foreword of the first volume Rahner and his co-authors argue that, while many theological disciplines have enlightened the essence of what it means to be church, when the "church how-

ever began to concretely deliver its message, care about the salvation of the individual, i.e. doing 'pastoral care'"* (Rahner 1970, p. 5), a theologically profound plan for the life of the church in the present time that went beyond pastoral "tactics" was still missing. The authors see this as one of the main reasons for a timid and often reactionary practice (cf. ibid., p. 5). In this situation the handbook offers not only an overview over the practices of the church in the world, but a decidedly theological option, an ecclesiological, or even ecclesio-genic, i.e. church-generating, perspective. Rahner's final chapter in particular is inspired by this hopeful planning metaphor.

> Man plans himself and his environment, he is faber sui ipsius […]. Not just mind, truth, and moral demands are the land of the creative freedom of man, but the real world itself, which is not just the house, which man takes with little alterations as given from God or nature as his dwelling. It rather becomes material, a stone quarry for the realisation of his plans. Man begins to plan himself and his world, genetically, psychologically, economically, and sociologically.* (Rahner 1969, p. 746)

While Rahner sees the making and execution of plans as part of the modern existence, he sees the church lacking this perspective.

> She had always waited hoping and praying for the coming of the Lord as the end of history. But she had never been the one who planned her future in the world, creatively drafted it, and actively tried to realise it.* (ibid., p. 747)

While former times in history did not allow for such a planning outlook into the future, the current times, as Rahner sees it, do. With humanity boldly planning its future and with a church that is part of human history – a strong reference to the Council[3] – the time has come where the church itself must engage in what Rahner calls an "ecclesiological futurology."*

The planning paradigm presented here shows how Rahner owes much of his perspective on pastoral theology to the zeitgeist of theology in his (post-war and post-conciliar) time, which brought together the desire for concrete structural reform and a perspective towards the future. This culminated – as we shall see

3 While the *Handbook* appeared during the Second Vatican Council, the project, which began much earlier, is not an application of the Council. There is however in the person of Karl Rahner, who was an advisor to the council, a personal link between the two.

in the final chapter – in the re-organisation of the parishes, often starting with the role of the priest as an organisational leader (cf. Ziemann 2007, p. 206), but then also looking at the future of the whole of the church:

> In these suggestions and blueprints for a restructuring of pastoral institutions, the term "planning" could be heard […]. With that, the semantics from the realm of politics entered the Catholic church.[4] […] In the background stood the experience of societal change which had "rapidly accelerated" in contrast to previous epochs. This also brought about a futurisation of the understanding of belief and church […]. Not just pastoral sociologians but also cardinal Lorenz Jaeger of Paderborn and the council-theologian Joseph Ratzinger reflected now on the future of the church.* (ibid., pp. 227–228)

Against this euphoria for technocratic planning, we must however note that Rahner has never ceased to bring in the perspective of an *open* future, beyond human influence and planning phantasies.

Building

With the metaphor of planning, the aspect of executing these plans also comes into view. Like before, Rahner focusses on the (Roman Catholic) church in his reflections, asking "what must church do *today*?"* (Rahner 1970, p. 5) He therefore addresses his *practical* theological handbook to everyone who is engaged in the "self-construction of the church for its ministry to the salvation in the world"* (ibid., p. 5). As mentioned before, Rahner does not just see this building activity as a merely mental or spiritual activity but he has the concrete materiality of history before his eyes (cf. Rahner 1969, p. 747). He ends his final chapter with a call to action:

> What we can creatively anticipate from this near future remains a promise […]. It comes towards us in God's action and we move towards it with our own freedom. Measured against the future of the church, as it will be, we know

4 And with that the idea of the "technical feasibility of planning, its justification from the social sciences, and its socio-political self-understanding"* as well as the "high expectations in a reform-euphoria of the late 60s"* (Ziemann 2007, p. 248) – which cooled down in the 70s.

> very little of it. But this little already means a great challenge for our own responsibility and action.* (Rahner 1969, p. 759)

Reading Karl Rahner's texts today, a strong positive vision of planning and building for the future becomes apparent. Despite the dangers of modern technologies,[5] the ability to take matters into his own hands is what differentiates modern man and paves the way towards a better future. Such an approach seems out of sync with our time when we experience that "we have much less of a handle on our own life, the time, and God, than was suggested by modernity"* (Schüßler 2015, p. 98). Rather, "with every event the world and our own biography can radically change, but we seldom know the direction of such changes"* (ibid., p. 98). The practical theologian Michael Schüßler calls this an event dispositive:

> In an event dispositive the world functions like the user surface of a PC. We have many windows opened simultaneously, next to each other, overlapping one another, with different contents, which might stem from different historical periods, which combine virtual and real. […] This corresponds to the pragmatic shift in the understanding of time, which is an expression of a contingent, fundamentally situative, and present-based performance of human life in the present time […]. Our life is not based on principles or the story of history, but on paradoxical practices* (Schüßler 2013, p. 141; cf. Schüßler 2015, p. 98; cf. also Agamben 2008)

In order to do justice to Rahner's approach in this retrospect, we must acknowledge that the same Karl Rahner who talks about planning for the future is also aware of the radically disrupting events that can cross our plans. But he in his time could not have been aware how painful the end of the great unifying narrative of progress would be. The end of linear progress in time as "the last quasi-transcendental foundation of theology"* (Schüßler 2013, p. 205) makes it im-

5 Karl Rahner himself has written on the challenges of the biotechnologies of his time and the questions their promise of human omnipotence raises for theology. His essay on the "self-manipulation"* of man also exhibits a positive assessment of the planning powers of humanity on the basis of man's God-given freedom, his fundamental directedness towards the good, and his relative independence from the constraints of nature (Rahner 2002 (1966)).

possible for utopian thinking to be an option at the beginning of the 21st century.[6]

At the same time, the church remains the realm within which Rahner develops his argument. While the institution might change dramatically, and Rahner demonstrates this in several areas in his final chapter, it still provides the ground upon which these developments take place. The focus on the church might be due to the fact that the author is a systematic theologian with a profound interest in ecclesiology.[7] But it might also be rooted in Rahner's biography; he had experienced the time of National Socialism as a member of the Jesuit order whose members were drawn together by their common resistance against the regime.

> The role of the church as home grew more and more; One served the church, and one expected stability and affirmation from it, the less the general public could offer something like that.* (Kolosz 2014, p. 36)

Adding to that experience, Rahner's work as a pastor during that time, first in Vienna at the Institute for Pastoral Care, where he also worked on the *Vienna Memorandum*, and towards the end of the war in Lower Bavaria, we can understand that a practical theology for the building up of the church also strongly resonated with the pastoral worker Karl Rahner.

A Point of Culmination

Many pictures could tell the story of the handbook project and Karl Rahner's practical theology. There are portraits of the young Rahner with his Jesuit brethren in Innsbruck, Rahner with cardinal Walter König at the Second Vatican Council, or next to Joseph Ratzinger at the Würzburg Synod, and there are pictures of the theologian laboriously working at his desk (cf. ibid., 55–57,

6 I will come back to that in the second part of this book. Especially my reading of Bloch and of utopian planning in architecture must be viewed under the impression that not only theology but late-modern thought as such can only ruefully look back on the periods in history where we could believe in the "message of the end of time"* (Schüßler 2013, p. 206).

7 The handbook might have looked different if it had based practical theology not on the "self-actualization" of the church but on the prolongation of the acting of Christ in the person of the pastor, as Franz Xaver Arnold proposed (cf. Laumer 2010, p. 275).

cover image). But I want to abstract from the person and his iconic image and turn to a little detail.

The fact that I have deliberately chosen this detail, or rather object, is important, since I do not want to insinuate that there is a natural relation between the object and Rahner's theology. What I do here can be best described as a constellation, an assemblage "bringing together in a creative way different things, of which one hardly thought that they would fit together – and whose contrasts open up a space for new insights"* (Bauer 2015, p. 10). An example from the history of philosophy illustrates this process: Walter Benjamin travelling to Naples to write a *History of the Baroque Tragedy*. In his book *Adorno in Naples**, Michael Mittelmeier provides an insight into the project:

> Equipped with 600 quotations from German baroque tragedies and their surroundings ("assembled in the best possible order and clarity") he makes his way to Southern Italy in April 1924.* (Mittelmeier 2013, n.p.)

What Benjamin sets out to do is to gain a new meaning from his assembled fragments, i.e. quotations. In his book, Mittelmeier shows how many German intellectuals – Siegfried Kracauer, Theodor Adorno, or Alfred Sohn-Rethel – travel to Italy and there develop a new philosophy from the fragments they brought with them and from what they found. Even more insightful is to observe what actually happens in Southern Italy, since it is not the philosophers but the local people who are the masters of assembling something new from the fragments.

> As callous masters of the art of improvisation the Neapolitans construct from non-functioning technical things a "lucky arsenal of the broken" and assemble them to something surprisingly new. Sohn-Rethel […] tells the story of a helmsman who unceremoniously uses the broken motor of his boat to make coffee. Or the proprietor of a latteria, who uses a defunct bike motor to whip cream. […] The things become miraculous because they are broken, or rather liberated from their proper contexts.* (ibid., n.p.)

Creating constellations of artefacts *liberated* from their former context can be understood as a method between cultural and scientific production still valid

today, e.g. in the culture of sampling in Hip-Hop and other music styles, in architecture, and art.[8]

The picture chosen here to highlight aspects of Karl Rahner's theology is more humble both in form and epistemological scope than Benjamin's fragments. In front of the Herder building in Freiburg stands a small fragment of a steel bar, a massive black T-beam with bolted on connection plates. It is the relic of the steel skeleton that supported the house before it was destroyed in a British aerial bombardment in the *Operation Tigerfish* in 1944. The steel bar is severely deformed as a result of the extreme heat and pressure when the building burned and collapsed after being hit. I want to look at two aspects of this fragment and with that direct our attention to two aspects of Rahner's pastoral theology.

Figure 2: Herder Verlag (2011): The Herder Publishing House in Portrait. Manuel Herder on the "Red House"

Watch the film portrait of the Herder publishing house: "Verlag Herder im Portrait: Manuel Herder über das 'rote Haus'". Manuel Herder stands in front of the fragment of the T-beam. You can find the video on *YouTube*.

Steel and Brick

When Hermann Herder took over the publishing house from his father Benjamin, he relocated the offices to a new building which he commissioned in 1910. The "Red House", as it was called because of the painted façade, was constructed in the neo-baroque style that sought to resemble monasteries in Southern Germany. The inner structure, however, was highly modern, employing a steel skeleton which supports the building. What looks like brick and mortar is only a thin cladding wall with elaborate stucco held up by a massive steel frame on the inside. As a material, steel stands for both the technical capabilities in the industrialised nations of the 19th and 20th century. But it also

8 There is much more to be said about the technique of creating such constellations, the role of the creator and the eigenvalue of the material and intellectual artefacts used to create these constellations (cf. for the field of religion e.g. Altglas 2014). That must be the focus of another book.

stands for the catastrophe of industrialised warfare that e.g. Ernst Jünger has portrayed in his memoir of the First World War, *Storm of Steel* (1920).

When he rebuilt the red house after the war, Herder chose to restore the baroque façade as well and with that hark back to the architectural and stylistic reference system of neo-baroque and historicism. The publisher had other options: when the building was commissioned, he could have employed architects from the Bauhaus or the New Objectivity school. After the war the variety of options was even greater.

In the same way, Rahner's pastoral theology with its ecclesiological focus looks traditional from a modern perspective. It employs a reference system of church, its personnel, and its hierarchy. But the structure that holds up this system is modern: Rahner's ecclesiology and his theology of revelation[9] revolutionised the understanding of the church's existence as well as the role of theology in the world. They are based on a change of perspective that is characteristic of the Second Vatican Council and its pastoral constitution *Gaudium et spes*.

> In this text, the church performs a change of location in that it locates itself in the midst of the world and the present time. The understanding of the pastoral changes – it becomes the benchmark for the dogma. Pastoral means: the acting of the church in the world. With that, the boundaries of the church are transcended. With that, social policy questions become theologically relevant, the world *today* becomes the place where the church must realise its mission* (Polak 2015a, p. 74)[10].

9 Cf. e.g. *Hörer des Wortes* (Rahner 1997 (1941 and 1963)), based on his lectures in Salzburg in 1937, which develops a theology that takes God's revelation throughout history and man's ability to understand God speaking to him as a starting point.

10 Cf. also another article by the same author on the topic, which is referring to Karl Rahner and his essay on the pastoral constitution *Gaudium et spes*: "The church needs an insight, which is not part of the – in the traditional sense revealed – *depositum fidei*, to act according to its nature. For theology this is – even 50 years after *Gaudium et spes* – a new, strange, and 'frightening' business. […] Theology and the magisterium have to deal with the present and are shaken to their very foundations: They rely on an analysis of the present time. […] *Gaudium et spes* taken seriously means: There is God's revelation that can be found in the present"* (Polak 2015b, p. 87).

Thus, what at first glance looks traditional in Rahner's text, i.e. the constant references to the church living out its mission[11], is a modern shift of perspective. "The systematic theologian of an epoch, reminds (the whole of) theology of its constitutive practical character"* (Bucher 2002, p. 173).

Bent and Broken

The steel monument is accompanied by a stone tablet on the side of the building which reads: "Martis cruenti vim horribilem igneis telis desuper effusam die 27. Novembris mcmxliv nuntiat hoc momentum terribile." It reminds the reader of the horrors of industrialised warfare which have destroyed the building. Manuel Herder, the current head of the publishing house, recalls the importance of the memorial: "My grandfather set it up in this spot. It was important to him. It is a sign against the war"* (Herder 2011). The industrial capabilities that made steel frames possible at the beginning of the 20th century also fueled two wars that would destroy much of Europe. Modernity is a story of brokenness. We could argue that in a similar fashion Rahner radically relates his theology and understanding of God to man's bent and broken existence.

There is however a striking difference between Rahner's project and the reconstructions at Herder. Going beyond the self-assuredness of classical modernity and towards a position that recognises the ambivalence of modernity, Karl Rahner's modern "frame" is not there to hold up an old façade but rather his *prima facie* traditional façade hides something radically new.[12]

Rainer Bucher argues that Rahner brought the rift to light that had been covered up during the Pian epoch (cf. Bucher 2001, p. 184)[13]. His pastoral theol-

11 Rahner writes about the "Selbstvollzug", which could be roughly translated as the church "living out itself", were it not for Rahner's understanding of grace, which transcends the boundaries of the church. I.e. the "Selbstvollzug" is not qualified by the limits of the organisational body of the Catholic church but rather by the universality of God's grace which encompasses the whole of humanity.

12 I want to thank Michael Schüßler for his helpful comments on the difference between Rahner building something new with the old and Herder reconstructing something old with the new.

13 Bucher argues that this covering up in the years from 1850 to 1960 is not a return to old certainties but a fictional return and therefore itself a modern project (cf. Bucher 2002, pp. 170–171).

ogy reminds us that there is no seamless transition between the theological as well as churchly tradition and the acting of pastoral personnel in the world. His diagnosis is that of a complicated reciprocity. It seems that Rahner's pastoral theology both participates in and marks the end of the grand unifying narratives. From that perspective we must also read the planning and building imagery that Rahner presents us with – not as a definitive path to the future, but as an unstable option that could break down in the events of time.