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HOPE THAT ALL CAN BE SAVED: A RECONSIDERATION AND JOINT READING WITH CONGAR OF RAHNER'S "ANONYMOUS CHRISTIAN"

Much ill will has been directed at Karl Rahner's idea of the "Anonymous Christian" in light of the drop in evangelistic fervor in the post-Vatican II era. Yet Rahner is emphatic in his assertions that this phenomenon's existence is a necessary implication of Vatican II's developed articulations on interreligious theology and the Church's perennial attribution of the sole salvific mediatorship to Jesus Christ. Rahner finds an implicit ally in Yves Congar, who carried a particular interest in the salvation of non-Christians and the legitimacy of non-Christian religions. He agrees in substance with Rahner, but objects to the name his Jesuit counterpart chooses. This paper brings several relevant Vatican II documents into discussion to draw out the significance and rightful value of Rahner's thesis.

Keywords: Karl Rahner, Yves Congar, Anonymous Christian, Vatican II, Evangelization.

Introduction

The conversation surrounding the merits of Karl Rahner's concept of the "Anonymous Christian" (hereafter AC) has been, to say the least, contentious. In encountering this controversy, I aim to summarize and evaluate the response of Yves Congar to this theologoumenon. Here, I will evaluate briefly how favorably they compare in light of certain Vatican II documents – specifically, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, *Nostra Aetate*, *Ad Gentes*, *Gaudium et Spes*, and *Lumen Gentium* – to attain a basic estimation of how they resonate with the council. It will be seen that Congar is actually quite in line with Rahner's thesis, which has sure validity and value, both theologically and ecclesiastically, and firm conciliar foundation, despite the critiques it elicits – and that some of these critiques arise from a misinterpretation of what Rahner is actually developing in good faith.

This essay proceeds as follows: 1) Rahner's doctrine of the AC will be sketched; 2) Congar's response to Rahner's thesis will be presented and his own theology of

the salvation of non-Christians will be laid out and evaluated; 3) I will compare the theologies of each on the idea of the AC against the Vatican II documents mentioned above; 4) I will assert value belonging rightfully to the AC; and 5) end with a brief concluding reflection on its significance.

Rahner's "Anonymous Christian"

Here I present the idea of the AC at length in Rahner's own words, will step back to draw out its defining characteristics, and offer some critiques:

this means in its turn that there must be degrees of membership of the Church, not only in ascending order from being baptised, through the acceptance of the fullness of the Christian faith and the recognition of the visible head of the Church, to the living community of the Eucharist, indeed to the realisation of holiness, but also in descending order from the explicitness of baptism into a non-official and anonymous Christianity which can and should yet be called Christianity in a meaningful sense, even though it itself cannot and would not describe itself as such. If it be true that the man who is the object of the Church's missionary endeavour is or can be already prior to it a man who is on the way towards his salvation and finds it in certain circumstances without being reached by the Church's preaching, and if it be true at the same time that the salvation which he achieves is the salvation of Christ, because there is no other, then it must be possible to be not only an anonymous "theist," but also an anonymous Christian, and this (since the Church of Christ is not a purely interior reality) not in any merely intangible inner way, but also with a certain making visible and tangible of the anonymous relationship. ...

Therefore, no matter what a man states in his conceptual, theoretical and religious reflection, anyone who does not say in his heart, "there is no God" (like the "fool" in the psalm) but testifies to him by the radical acceptance of his being, is a believer. But if in this way he believes in deed and in truth in the holy mystery of God, if he does not suppress this truth but leaves it free play, then the grace of this truth by which he allows himself to be led is always already the grace of the Father in his Son. And anyone who has let himself be taken hold of by this grace can be called with every right an "anonymous Christian."¹

The AC is, then, a person who 1) does not explicitly reject the existence of a God, 2) allows the work of grace to operate within his soul and through his good will, life, and actions (making him *de facto* a theist), 3) in this way anticipates the graces of the baptized, though 4) he would not describe any of this as such. This leads to problems, but there is much in this that resonates with and points to traditional Catholic teaching, such as an openness to

¹ Karl Rahner. Anonymous Christian // Idem. *Theological Investigations*, vol. 6: *Concerning Vatican II* / tr. Karl-H. Kruger, Boniface Kruger. Baltimore 1965, p. 390.

man's transcendent end,² Christ's declaration that a tree is known by its works (Luke 6:43-45), and the importance of works in tandem with faith (James 2:18ff).³ Of course, what really marks a true Catholic in the full sense of the word is that his assent in faith to specifically the Church's teaching leads to purely motivated and authentically good acts in praise of God. This particular faith is mutually influenced and strengthened by the works which should flow from it.⁴ Additionally, the charitable reader can see in Rahner's words a genuine display at ecumenical and humanistic generosity,⁵ especially in light of the rise of the New Atheism, which GS addressed at length as a major issue of the modern world (§§19-21). And, contrary to a cursory, uncharitable reading, Rahner is *not* lessening the archetypal importance of Christ as the center and means of salvation for all men and all times, nor is it an endorsement of an ecclesial and ecumenical relativism.

There are, however, clear problems that arise from Rahner's thesis. First and foremost, there is a sort of insensitivity towards and reduction of man's free will and intellect: any given theist who practices the core ethical teachings of Christianity is in actuality a Christian, no matter what that man believes in his heart and holds in his intellect and professes with his lips. His beliefs can be trumped and/or co-opted by the claim of an "outsider." While I think this is the most significant difficulty for the idea of the AC, I do not dwell on it here.

Second, as Hans Urs von Balthasar points out, there are certain doctrines that a man must hold *explicitly* if he is to adopt the title "Christian." Prime among these are the accession of a life that may be called to culminate in martyrdom and the Cross itself. Balthasar is especially defensive here (rightly), as he sees that "the emphasis on the doctrine of an anonymous Christianity ... so urgently required in the present situation, involves a proportionate devaluation of the theology of the Cross."⁶ Balthasar is worried that some may here perceive and act

² See Jacques Maritain. *Integral Humanism: Temporal and Spiritual Problems for a New Christendom* / tr. Joseph W. Evans. New York 1968, pp. 27-28, 126.

³ To take an everyday example: a child who find a soft round ball in his backyard, sets up a kind of goal with 2 markers, and kicks the ball through the goal, is *de facto*, playing "soccer," though he may never have heard of the sport's proper, universal name, nor seen it played in a formal game setting.

⁴ Cf. William C. Mattison III. *Introducing Moral Theology: True Happiness and the Virtues*. Grand Rapids, MI 2008, p. 327: "Simply put, Christian faith matters for how we live, including those activities that nonbelievers can do virtuously."

⁵ See Rahner. Anonymous Christian, p. 391.

⁶ Hans Urs von Balthasar. *The Moment of Christian Witness*. San Francisco 1994, p. 100; cf. 13, where Balthasar cites LG §42 here in his favor: "Though few are presented with such an opportunity, nevertheless all must be prepared to confess Christ before men, and to follow him along the way of the cross through the persecutions which the church will never fail to suffer." In other words, part of being a Christian means willing to confess the Faith in the face of death, not just by the way one lives or the religious (pre)dispositions he holds. Still, while he may not sufficiently incorporate these into his AC thesis for Balthasar's liking, Rahner is not insensitive to the call to

on a latent propensity inherent in Rahner's thesis to collapse the divide between Christians and non-Christians with the rise of the AC theologoumenon, at the expense of an authentic Christian discipleship that refuses to set aside suffering as a necessary part of a truly human(istic) life.

Another dilemma surrounding the idea of the AC is the post-Vatican II lack of evangelistic fervor: "various Catholic rather a [mere] sign of the Kingdom of God. ... It cannot be denied ... that since the Second Vatican Council the missionary endeavours of the Church have been seriously weakened."⁷ Whether this downturn of evangelization can be traced as a result of theologians misreading Rahner and implementing theologically this breakdown of the very distinction between Christians and non-Christians is a difficult question, but one that sadly can reasonably be answered in a qualified, tentative affirmative – from here, pastorally, how does the Church exhort the faithful and convince them of the need to evangelize those who are already so-called "non-baptized members" of the Church?

While Balthasar's concern is valid, I again assert that this is a misinterpretation of Rahner's thesis, and that he rejects this unfounded collapse between Christians and non-Christians and condemns the evangelistic apathy following Vatican II that many may attribute to the rise to prominence of the doctrine of the AC. It is important to remember both 1) that the idea of the AC arose in great deal as a product of Vatican II's re-presented theology of salvation for the non-Christian, and 2) what Rahner himself gives as a cautionary disclaimer and reminder: "this is not a hermeneutic principle critically to reduce the whole corpus of traditional theology and dogmatics ...and thereby to make Christianity in this form more acceptable."⁸ Its scope is within Vatican II's reach – and, as such, it is a thesis whose background and context Congar would have been familiar with.

Congar's Response to Rahner's Thesis and Theology of the Salvation of Non-Christians

But what exactly does Congar himself say about the AC?

I am fully convinced that people can be saved without knowing the Gospel and even without knowing God, when they are not to be blamed for this ignorance. ... The period reaching from Abraham to the present is nothing in the history

martyrdom and the paramount position the Cross plays in human development, as J. J. Mueller, SJ. *What Are They Saying About Theological Method?* Ramsey, NJ 1984, p. 12, shows: "Our life is a constant task of becoming transformed into God's holy and loving mystery. By imitating in our lives what Christ was in his incarnation, we also expect to share in his passion and death. The cost of discipleship is total fidelity to God."

⁷ Gabriel Flynn. *The Role of Unbelief in the Theology of Yves Congar // New Blackfriars* 85 (2004) 437.

⁸ Rahner. *Anonymous Christian*, p. 396.

of the race. It is certain therefore that there was salvation outside of that time, but I do not like to speak of “anonymous Christians” in this connection. In my opinion this is a bad expression. To use the term “Christian” is to imply knowledge of Jesus Christ leading to baptism, and therefore the term “anonymous Christian” is contradictory. I criticise the expression but not the idea. I prefer to use the term “salvation of the non-evangelised.”⁹

Should we speak of “anonymous Christians”? That which K. Rahner wished to designate by these words is something authentic: it is the condition of men [or women] not evangelised and yet justified by the grace of Christ. I find it difficult to see how one can deny that such a condition exists. But the expression “anonymous Christians” is not a happy one, for “Christian” implies the profession of the Faith proclaimed and received, followed by baptism.¹⁰

While not an outright endorsement of Rahner’s thesis, Congar certainly does not make any severe reactionary moves against it. His main issue is merely with the terminology Rahner uses. This is a difficulty acknowledged and conceded by Rahner – yet he insists that it is unavoidable in light of the thesis which he sees as inescapable in light of a loving God whose salvific work operates outside of the temporal realm.¹¹ Congar even goes as far to say that the “Church includes members who appear to be outside her. They belong, invisibly and incompletely, but they belong. They belong to the Church insofar as they belong to Christ,”¹² and that due to a widespread misunderstanding, the Church should avoid using the phrase *extra Ecclesiam nulla salus*.¹³ Despite this, he would always maintain, however, that the “Church can never accept a ... view that the same grace is equally effective outside the Church as it is within,”¹⁴ and never does he waver in

⁹ Tony Sheerin. Talking to Yves Congar // *Africa: St. Patrick’s Missions* 50 (1974) 7, quoted in Flynn. *The Role of Unbelief*, p. 430.

¹⁰ Yves Congar. Non-Christian Religions and Christianity // *Evangelisation, Dialogue and Development: Selected Papers of the International Theological Conference, Nagpur (India)* / ed. Mariasusai Dhavamony. Rome 1972, p. 134, quoted in Flynn. *The Role of Unbelief*, p. 431.

¹¹ See Karl Rahner. Observations on the Problem // *Theological Investigations*, vol. 14: *Ecclesiology, Questions in the Church, The Church in the World* / tr. David Bourke. London, 1976, p. 281. Here he acknowledges the objections of his contemporaries, such as Balthasar, de Lubac, and Schillebeeckx.

¹² Yves Congar. *Divided Christendom: A Catholic Study of the Problem of Reunion*. London 1939, p. 234, quoted in Flynn. *The Role of Unbelief*, p. 433. This echoes Rahner. Anonymous Christian, p. 394: “In the acceptance of himself man is accepting Christ as the absolute perfection and guarantee of his own anonymous movement towards God by grace, and the acceptance of this belief is again not an act of man alone but the work of God’s grace which is the grace of Christ, and this means in its turn the grace of his Church which is only the continuation of the mystery of Christ, his permanent visible presence in our history.”

¹³ Andrew Meszaros. Yves Congar and the Salvation of the Non-Christian // *Louvain Studies* 37:2-3 (2013) 197.

¹⁴ Flynn. *The Role of Unbelief*, p. 436.

asserting Christ as the one and true locus of salvation, and the Church as the necessary route for arrival. This is a further refinement of Rahner's thesis: "Outside the Church, there is action of the Holy Spirit, but he is not given himself, in person ..."¹⁵ Rahner himself agrees with this: "The Christian is convinced that in order to achieve salvation man must believe in God, and not merely in God but in Christ."¹⁶

Furthermore, Congar's theology of the salvation for the non-Christian is, unsurprisingly, Thomistic, as he employs the distinction of the will of God as antecedent and consequent. In the presence of this distinction, Congar might be said to attribute the antecedent will of God only to the existence of the Church, though not to non-Christian religions, to which he *seems* to ascribe to God's consequent will.

Understood this way, non-Christian religions are, in a sense, willed according to a "secondary intention," or a "second order" by God, consequent upon the first (antecedent) intention failing or, more accurately in this case, not yet being fully carried out ... [this] does, of course, have its drawbacks, [such as presenting a] God trying to solve a problem that he himself is the cause of ... [or that] two seemingly opposed things (Christianity and non-Christian religions) can both be willed at the same time, under *different aspects*. ... Applied to our topic, God antecedently wills the Christian means of salvation, but consequently (really and efficaciously!) wills the existence of certain non-Christian means of salvation. In other words, *consequent* upon the Christian means of salvation not yet reaching, or being inadequately presented to, an individual, God wills non-Christian religions.¹⁷

While there are points that need to be ironed out, Congar is clearly in sympathy with Rahner's aims and generous (*not* relativistic!) spirit. Congar's theology of the salvation of the non-Christian, is, of course, inseparable from his ecclesiology, and therefore is close to de Lubac.¹⁸

¹⁵ Yves Congar. *The Wide World My Parish: Salvation and Its Problems*. London 1961, p. 111, quoted in Meszaros. *Salvation of the Non-Christian*, p. 208, n. 57.

¹⁶ Rahner. *Anonymous Christian*, p. 390.

¹⁷ Meszaros. *Yves Congar and the Salvation of the Non-Christian*, pp. 218-219. This is only an interpretation of Congar's thoughts, and do not stand explicitly under his pen, as Meszaros acknowledges: "Non-Christian religions not only provide *de facto* ordinary means of salvation, but they also, if we recall, for Congar, 'have as such a place in the plan of God, and not merely under the title of his permissive will ...' [Congar. *Non-Christian Religions and Christianity*, pp. 140-141]. The ellipsis here is a heartbreaker, for while Congar associates non-Christian religions with something more than God's permissive will, *he fails to indicate under what other will non-Christian religions fall*" (216; emphasis mine). It might, in the end, be simpler to say after Vatican II, we have gained a better, wider understanding of the God's consequent will in light of a further elaboration of the sole mediatorship of salvation through Christ. I am indebted to Barrett H. Turner for this insight.

¹⁸ Flynn. *The Role of Unbelief*, p. 433; cf. p. 438.

Ultimately, there is nothing here in Congar's critiques of the AC he identifies as heterodox. While the pair may differ in their approaches and terminology, they seem to agree on essentials. Thus, Congar brings to this controversial conversation the admirable axiom of ecumenism: in essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity.

Rahner, Congar, and Vatican II

Particular passages from Vatican II documents relevant to this discussion will now be considered in light of the positions Rahner and Congar take on the doctrine of the AC

a. Unitatis Redintegratio

While UR focuses on baptized Christians, and thus *not* on those people who would be called anonymous Christians, still the principles it lays down for ecumenical dialogue can be applied to those outside the explicit title of Christian. Through UR, the Church declares that "some and even very many of the significant elements and endowments which together go to build up and give life to the Church itself can exist outside the visible boundaries of the Catholic Church: ... the life of grace, faith, hope and charity, with the other interior gifts of the Holy Spirit, and visible elements too" (§3). This is a re-presentation of the basic belief that all which is good comes from God, and thus can (or at least should) be found in the Church, the sacrament of salvation *par excellence*, and only those who are baptized and immersed in the Church's sacramental life can experience the particular graces brought and wrought by Her Divine Advocate, the Holy Spirit. However, this does not take away the "limitless openness"¹⁹ inherent in those who find themselves formally outside of the Church (inherent in all men by virtue of being made *imago Dei*) which allows them to adopt and grow in acquired cardinal virtues, promoting that which is truly good. Still, because they are outside the formal bounds of the Church, ACs are incapable of living with and practicing the infused theological virtues necessary in preparing for entry into Heaven: *loving* God above all else and everything in and for Him, *believing* the truth about Him, and *hoping* for Him above all else. This involves learning what truly pleases God and why – questions that can only be known through the Church. This leaves sticky questions about how those who die without such infused theological virtues – but who have nonetheless lived a life open to God's grace – are to be made fit for eternal life.

Rahner acknowledges this difficulty and addresses it thus:

There is no justification for regarding this grace as being supernatural in a merely ontic, pre-conscious sense, such as would be required for the positing

¹⁹ Rahner. Anonymous Christian, p. 392.

of any moral act which, as far as consciousness was concerned, was purely natural. Rather must we conceive this grace as more than merely ontic, as also entering consciousness and therefore as engendering true faith in the theological sense, even though this is not yet reflective. The lesser interpretation is also excluded by a remark in the same Council's decree on the Missions (§7), in which it is explicitly said that God "in the unknown ways" of his grace can give faith without which there is no salvation even to those who have not yet heard the preaching of the gospel [cf. GS §22].²⁰

Here is a possible yet rather implausible way of holding in tension an all-loving God whose salvific activity cannot be boxed in with the absolute necessity of the theological virtues, though it again can seem to undervalue the gift and importance of the intellect in assent to the faith. And while AG §7 does refer to the *theological virtue* of faith, there remains the problem of how theological virtues take root in the hearts of ACs.

Nevertheless, Congar and Rahner would both affirm with UR that everything good – outside the Church, that is – is a means, in some way, to a greater or lesser degree, of preparing man to encounter *the* Good. Congar does in fact see "the non-Christian religions [as] a preparation for the Gospel."²¹ And it is the council's declaration on those religions which will now be considered.

b. Nostra Aetate

Rahner famously declared Vatican II to be a monumental shift into a new (and third) epoch of Church history.²² He thus sees in NA

a truly positive evaluation of the great world religions [which] is initiated for the first time in the doctrinal history of the Church. Furthermore ... the documents on the Church [LG §§16- 17], on the missions [AG §§1, 3, 7, 13], and on the Church in the modern world [GS §1] proclaim a universal and effective salvific will of God which is limited only by the evil decision of human conscience and nothing else. This implies the possibility of a properly salvific revelation-faith even beyond the Christian revelatory word.²³

NA does indeed state that God's "providence, His manifestations of goodness, His saving design extend to all men" (§1) and that the Church "rejects nothing that is true and holy in [non-Christian] religions" (§2). When Rahner asserts that

²⁰ Ibid., p. 398.

²¹ Flynn. *The Role of Unbelief*, p. 433. Flynn adds that de Lubac agrees with Congar on this point.

²² Karl Rahner. *Towards a Fundamental Theological Interpretation of Vatican II // Theological Studies* 40:4 (1979) 721-724. This is not necessarily to say that Rahner is advocating what Benedict XVI has dubbed the "hermeneutic of discontinuity" in interpreting the council.

²³ Ibid., p. 720. Cf. Declan Marmion. *Karl Rahner, Vatican II, and the Shape of the Church // Theological Studies* 78:1 (2017) 39.

“universal and effective salvific will of God which is limited only by the evil decision of human conscience and nothing else,” he may find conciliar support in GS: “Always summoning him to love good and avoid evil, the voice of conscience when necessary speaks to his heart: do this, shun that. For man has in his heart a law written by God; to obey it is the very dignity of man; according to it he will be judged” (§16); “Only in freedom can man direct himself toward goodness” (§17); “Undeniably, those who willfully shut out God from their hearts and try to dodge religious questions are not following the dictates of their consciences, and hence are not free of blame” (§19); and LG: “Whosoever, therefore, knowing that the Catholic Church was made necessary by Christ, would refuse to enter or to remain in it, could not be saved” (§14).

Regarding NA, Congar remarked in his *Journal* that “I worked on this; the introduction and conclusion are very nearly mine.”²⁴ This being the case, he was “vigilant that the ... declaration on non-Christian religions should clearly recognize Christ as being the fullness of the truth of salvation.”²⁵ Here again is his insistence that Christ be recognized as absolutely central and integral to salvific discussion and reality, though, as stated above, Congar maintains to value the good in non-Christian religions as truly beneficial preparation for acceptance of the Gospel.

c. Ad Gentes

The blame for the slackening of missionary and evangelistic activity referred to by Flynn Church in the post-Vatican II era should not be placed upon Rahner's shoulders. He was active in the composition not only of NA but AG as well, and was surely a force that pushed the council fathers to reevaluate the Church's understanding of Her own missionary efforts and how that new understanding impacted and interacted with Her newly presented and developing stance regarding non-Christian religions. This was the catalyst of Rahner's thesis of the AC was in great part: “It was not a question of him replacing explicit faith with a purely natural or metaphysical knowledge of God but of working out the implications for missionary activity of the coextensive relationship between transcendent and historical revelation.”²⁶ Rahner firmly believed that seeing non-Christian theists living lives unwittingly in accord with God's grace as *de facto* Christians should *not* be rationalized into any sort of evangelistic inertia, as he makes quite plain:

It would be quite foolish to think that this talk about “anonymous Christianity” must lessen the importance of mission, preaching, the Word of God, baptising, and so on. Anyone who wants to interpret our remarks about anonymous

²⁴ Yves Congar. *My Journal of the Council* /trans. M. J. Ronayne, M, C. Boulding; ed. D. Minns. Collegeville, MN 2012, p. 796.

²⁵ Érich Mahieu. Introduction // Congar. *My Journal of the Council*, p. 18.

²⁶ Marmion. Rahner, Vatican II, and the Shape of the Church, p. 39.

Christianity in this way, has not merely fundamentally misunderstood them, but has not read our exposition of them with sufficient attention.²⁷

Congar, who drafted AG's whole opening chapter,²⁸ affirms this: "One cannot use as motive for the urgency of missionary activity the salvation of souls which, without it, would be destined for loss."²⁹ Moreover, in appealing to LG §16's affirmation of the possibility of salvations for non-Christians, "he is not denying the salvific significance of missionary work; on the contrary, if the Church, in her own ministry to Christians, is working for the salvation of souls, then it is *a fortiori* the case that she is doing the same for non-Christians through her missionary activity."³⁰

AG §13, with an inundating plethora of scriptural references and support (removed for readability), makes the following claim:

Wherever God opens a door of speech for proclaiming the mystery of Christ there is announced to all men with confidence and constancy the living God, and He Whom He has sent for the salvation of all, Jesus Christ, in order that non-Christians, when the Holy Spirit opens their heart may believe and be freely converted to the Lord, that they may cleave sincerely to Him Who, being the "way, the truth, and the life," fulfills all their spiritual expectations, and even infinitely surpasses them.

This emphasizes Vatican II's call for the need to work and pray not just for the salvation of non-Christians, but their conversion and entrance into the Church here and now. AG §7 further confirms the absolute locus of salvation in Christ, and drives home Rahner's thesis:

Therefore though God in ways known to Himself can lead those inculpably ignorant of the Gospel to find that faith without which it is impossible to please Him (Hebrews 11:6), yet a necessity lies upon the Church (1 Corinthians 9:16), and at the same time a sacred duty, to preach the Gospel. And hence missionary activity today as always retains its power and necessity.

Rahner's thesis is *not* incompatible with the call to and need for missionary activity – and, what is more, Congar affirms this.

d. Gaudium et Spes

Rahner, reflecting on his contributions and impact on GS, wrote: "Although I took part in the elaboration of *Gaudium et Spes* at the Council, I would not

²⁷ Rahner. Anonymous Christian, pp. 396-397.

²⁸ Meszaros. Yves Congar and the Salvation of the Non-Christian, p. 206, n. 51.

²⁹ Congar. Non-Christian Religions and Christianity, p. 134, quoted in Meszaros. Yves Congar and the Salvation of the Non-Christian, p. 206, n. 49.

³⁰ Meszaros. Yves Congar and the Salvation of the Non-Christian, p. 207.

deny its undertone is too euphoric in its evaluation of humanity and the human condition.”³¹ This seems rich for the man who came up with the idea of the AC, but GS does in fact seem to confirm Rahner’s thesis:

All this holds true not only for Christians, but for all men of good will in whose hearts grace works in an unseen way. For, since Christ died for all men, and since the ultimate vocation of man is in fact one, and divine, we ought to believe that the Holy Spirit in a manner known only to God offers to every man the possibility of being associated with this paschal mystery. (§22)

GS’s opening exhortation to all men of good will certainly set an indelible mark on the council, and its effects are felt throughout its documents as the Church moves into the modern world. Nonetheless, GS, in the midst of its reflection on the rise of New Atheism, does not neglect to clarify forcefully the need to accept faith of God in Christ:

Again some form for themselves such a fallacious idea of God that when they repudiate this figment they are by no means rejecting the God of the Gospel. Some never get to the point of raising questions about God, since they seem to experience no religious stirrings nor do they see why they should trouble themselves about religion. ... Undeniably, those who willfully shut out God from their hearts and try to dodge religious questions are not following the dictates of their consciences, and hence are not free of blame; yet believers themselves frequently bear some responsibility for this situation. (§19)

For those who have had the supreme benefit of having the Gospel presented to them clearly and charitably, there is no excuse, intellectually or morally (though the two often coincide). But for those who have not had the privilege – the chance to flower into a creature giving explicit and unambiguous praise to their Creator – Vatican II is lenient, as God is lenient.

On the point GS §19 mentions about Christians being a big reason why atheism is on the rise, Congar might note, in returning to his Thomistic antecedent-consequent distinction, that there is, “no doubt, a great deal of human failure (especially among Christians) that prevents God’s antecedently willed plan of congregating the whole world into his Son’s body (cf. AG §7). Insofar as Christians have failed or obstructed the Church’s work in fulfilling it catholicity, God, it can be said, can as a consequence, will non-Christian religions according to His wisdom.”³² While again, this is certainly not an endorsement of Rahner’s thesis,

³¹ Karl Rahner. Christian Pessimism // Idem. *Theological Investigations*, vol. 22: *Humane Society and the Church of Tomorrow* / trans. Joseph Donceel. London 1991, pp. 157-158, quoted in Marmion. Rahner, Vatican II, and the Shape of the Church, p. 34, n. 32.

³² Meszaros. Yves Congar and the Salvation of the Non-Christian, p. 219. This is a part of what Matthew L. Lamb has dubbed as Thomas’ “sapiential eschatology;” see: Idem. *The Eschatology of St. Thomas Aquinas // Aquinas on Doctrine: A Critical Introduction* / eds. Th. G. Weinandy,

the implications of Congar's thought here unavoidably lend support to it: a God who is still able to "will" the salvation of those outside the Church, the archetypal sacrament of salvation He has established, at times *in spite of* that Church.

e. Lumen Gentium

And finally, perhaps the classic conciliar text in support of Rahner's thesis: LG §§16-17.

those who have not yet received the Gospel are related in various ways to the people of God. ... Nor is God far distant from those who in shadows and images seek the unknown God, for it is He who gives to all men life and breath and all things, and as Saviour wills that all men be saved. Those also can attain to salvation who through no fault of their own do not know the Gospel of Christ or His Church, yet sincerely seek God and moved by grace strive by their deeds to do His will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience. Nor does Divine Providence deny the helps necessary for salvation to those who, without blame on their part, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God and with His grace strive to live a good life.

This passage touches on all the characteristics of Rahner's AC. First of all, LG echoes more explicitly than any other Vatican II document Rahner's *Heilsoptimismus* ("salvation optimism"), God's will for universal salvation. Second, while LG does not go as far as Rahner does in saying that the AC is an implicit member of the Church, LG does describe such a person as related "in various ways" to the Church – and the fact that this passage is taken from LG's second chapter entitled "On the People of God" adds to this. Third, for those who have not had the Gospel presented to them in truth and charity *and* who are "moved *by grace*" to do good works, salvation is possible.

Congar, as redactor of §17,³³ had large influence here.

Whatever good or truth is found amongst them is looked upon by the Church as a preparation for the Gospel. For the Church is compelled by the Holy Spirit to do her part that God's plan may be fully realized, whereby He has constituted Christ as the source of salvation for the whole world. ... Through her work, whatever good is in the minds and hearts of men, whatever good lies latent in the religious practices and cultures of diverse peoples, is not only saved from destruction but is also cleansed, raised up and perfected unto the glory of God...

Congar is in clear support of this, which gave strong precedent to the declarations made nearly a year later in NA. Anything truly good operating in the hearts

D. Keating, and J. Yocum. London 2014, and Idem. *Wisdom Eschatology in Augustine and Aquinas // Aquinas the Augustinian* / eds. M. Dauphinais, B. David, and M. Levering. Washington, DC 2007.

³³ Meszaros. Yves Congar and the Salvation of the Non-Christian, p. 213.

of non-Christian theists acts as preparation for the truly Good as well – and will one day be perfected in Christ. Moreover, as Rahner and Congar would agree, in affirming both Christ as the center and source of salvation for all in addition to the potential salvation of non-Christian believers does *not* mean the Church has any license to lessen Her missionary efforts.

Furthermore, Congar sees as a much-improved way of formulating the classic *extra Ecclesiam nulla salus* the Vatican II re-presentation of the Church as the “universal sacrament of salvation” (§1), a development which Rahner and Congar both had influence on.³⁴ This reformulation possesses the permanent validity of the perennial formula but expressed in a way that does not lend itself so easily to (uncharitable) misinterpretation.³⁵

On LG, Rahner goes as far to say that what

is meant by this thesis of the anonymous Christian is actually also taught materially in the Constitution on the Church of Vatican II (§16). ... In its statements the Constitution on the Church is in no way implying that here in these cases salvation is achieved as it were in a substitute fashion by means of a purely natural morality. This would indeed contradict scripture and the magisterium. It is also excluded by the words of the Constitution itself: salvation is reached “*non sine divina gratia*,” “*sub influxu gratiae*.”³⁶

So Rahner is anxious to point out that he is not, substantially, offering anything novel or in contradiction to Church teaching – that what has always been laid down as the criteria for salvation does not alter its form in this way, that this part of the Church’s teaching has merely been reconsidered in light of the challenges modernity has brought, and been re-presented accordingly (though, as mentioned above, the problem of infused theological virtues for ACs remains). Congar, for his part, acknowledged, even five years before the council convened, the need to reconsider this theology in light of the modernity’s advances, especially the rise of atheism, and was unafraid then also to say that the need to re-present the *extra Ecclesiam* formula “amounted to an evolution in theology”³⁷.

³⁴ Marmion. Rahner, Vatican II, and the Shape of the Church, p. 31.

³⁵ Meszaros. Yves Congar and the Salvation of the Non-Christian, p. 197.

³⁶ Rahner. Anonymous Christian, pp. 397-398.

³⁷ Yves Congar. Salvation and the Non-Catholic // *New Blackfriars* 38:448-449 (1957) 290, 300; cf. p. 298, as an explanation for why the Church needed to reformulate its classical soteriological dictum: “The world of the Fathers and of medieval man was one penetrated through and through by the Gospel. They were, of course, vaguely, perhaps even subconsciously, aware that there were people who lived outside the confines of the Christian world, ‘in the shadow of death,’ but even this meagre measure of awareness was reduced to practically nothing by the way in which the Church held the limelight throughout that vast area over which she held undisputed sway. ... The picture changed completely when, in the wake of the great geographical discoveries of the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, somewhat similar progress

Rightful Merit and Support of Rahner's Thesis

Support can be found throughout orthodox theology for Rahner's thesis. Just because the idea is not completely acceptable does not mean that it should be thrown out completely. The same can be said of Rahner's Jesuit contemporary, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, whose theology, while under heavy criticism at the time of his writing, has slowly gained more approval with time. Time – and prayerful wisdom – helps to refine those theologies that merit consideration, whether praiseworthy or condemnatory. The work of John Paul II, Henri de Lubac (though he rejected the formulation “anonymous Christianity,” but not “anonymous Christian”), and Jacques Maritain all lend themselves in some way to the idea of the AC.

In *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, John Paul builds on conciliar grounds: “In another passage the Council says that the Holy Spirit works effectively even outside the visible structure of the Church (cf. LG §13), making use of these very *semina Verbi*, that constitute a kind of *common soteriological root present in all religions*.”³⁸ The point is that we not put God's saving action in a box: finite man cannot place such limitations on God, Who is infinite Being (and is infinitely loving). What exactly is this “common soteriological root,” however?

Who else, but Christ? This is a Christ, however, that cannot be understood as just another “great moral teacher,” as C. S. Lewis makes clear.³⁹ Rather, He must be asserted as absolutely unique in His saving activity: “This uniqueness is not only in his singularity as the God-man, but in the fact that this unique one impacts all other historical singularities, giving them form and meaning.”⁴⁰ There must be a dual-emphasis on Christ as truly *divine* and therefore through Whom any and all salvific work receives its efficacy. De Lubac adds onto this:

a fortiori, then, there is nothing good which Catholicism cannot claim for its own. To see in Catholicism one religion among others, one system among others, even if it be added that it is the only true religion, the only system that

was made by missionaries, principally of the Society of Jesus, in the realm of anthropology, and there was revealed for the first time to Christian eyes the existence of whole races of men who were disconcertingly civilized and good.”

³⁸ John Paul II. *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* / ed. V. Messori. New York 1994, p. 81; emphasis in original.

³⁹ C. S. Lewis. *Mere Christianity*. New York 2001, p. 52.

⁴⁰ Joshua R. Brown. Christ's ‘Symphonic’ Obedience: Exploring Hans Urs von Balthasar's Archetypal Experience through Han Confucianism // *Pro Ecclesia* 25:4 (2016) 440. Here, Brown is applying the absolute uniqueness of Christ as a way of purifying “world religion Christologies” by drawing attention to a Balthasarian reading and comparative lens to Christ as the archetype of filial obedience and love. Brown does not focus primarily on Christ's uniqueness by way of His divinity, but through His perfect kenotic obedience demonstrated on the Cross.

works, is to mistake its very nature, or at least to stop at the threshold. Catholicism is religion itself. It is the form that humanity must put on in order finally to be itself.⁴¹

Here there is a clear affirmation of the need to proclaim the Catholic faith, in addition to Christ, as being not just one good religion among many, but as *the* religion through which salvation flows. Still, even with this declaration, the Church, being universal (*katholikos*) is infinitely capacious in accepting all that which is good even from the “outside” – because, *de facto*, whether any man in- or outside the Church is aware of it, any such good thing is *already* in Her embrace by virtue of its being good. This also echoes, analogously (religious community to individual religious person), Rahner’s insistence that the man who “believes in deed and in truth in the holy mystery of God, if he does not suppress this truth but leaves it free play,” is in fact a Christian.

John Paul continues:

In your question you speak of “an honest, upright life even without the Gospel.” I would respond that if a life is truly upright it is because the Gospel, not known and therefore not rejected on a conscious level, is in reality already at work in the depths of the person who searches for the truth with honest effort and who willingly accepts it as soon as it becomes known to him. Such willingness is, in fact, a manifestation of grace at work in the soul. ... *Ultimately, only God can save man, but He expects man to cooperate.*⁴²

This draws very close to the sticking point on which many criticize Rahner’s thesis (including, as has just been seen, Congar): the name itself of “anonymous Christian.” Here, John Paul affirms Rahner’s core assertion that God’s grace is indeed active in the heart of a person of good will, whether he knows it or acknowledges it as such. All that John Paul leaves out is the title Rahner provides.

In his landmark *Integral Humanism*, Maritain also – though he is in this work focusing on a political philosophy and theology – affords analogous support to Rahner in a way similar to de Lubac (community to individual):

to a man purely and simply good and virtuous, constituted firmly in a state of moral rectitude, this presupposes the gift of charity, those “infused virtues” which properly merit, because they come from Christ and are in union with Him, the name of Christian virtues, even when as a consequence of some obstacle for which he is not responsible the subject in whom they exist does not know or fails to recognize the Christian profession. It follows from this that

⁴¹ Henri de Lubac. *Catholicism: Christ and the Common Destiny of Man* / trans. L. C. Sheppard & E. Englund, OCD. San Francisco 1988, p. 152. Cf. UR §4: “Whatever is truly Christian is never contrary to what genuinely belongs to the faith; indeed, it can always bring a deeper realization of the mystery of Christ and the Church.”

⁴² John Paul. *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, p. 194.

a city animated and guided by such elements is in reality and to this extent ... under the regime of Christ.⁴³

If a city which is animated by infused virtues can be understood as operating under the Christic standard – a sort of “anonymously Christian society” – then so too could an individual person be understood to be following the Christian path, though perhaps not in a totally conscious way.⁴⁴ Of course, Maritain would emphasize the need for such a society to be open to the inherent transcendent end within the soul of each person – specifically, to attain to the beatific vision and “share as a pure personality in the Uncreated Society of the Divine Persons, [and] enter into the Kingdom of God and the Light of Glory.”⁴⁵ This is to emphasize, again, not just one particular good end of the human person, but *the* Good End, and that there is but one way to reach that End.

Conclusion

Ultimately, a good deal of problems which have sprung up from around the idea of the AC are due to misreadings of Rahner’s thesis; or else, readers forget that

⁴³ Maritain. *Integral Humanism*, p. 69. It is hard to tell if Maritain is making the claim that we can make the jump from infused cardinal virtue to true theological virtue in a subject unaware of the Gospel. If so, perhaps his thought could make a major contribution to the “sticky question” brought up in this essay concerning the preparation of entry into heaven for souls who have cooperated with the work of grace in this life but, due to no fault of their own, have no idea about the Gospel, and thus no access to the theological virtues in their fullness.

Here, Maritain believes that only the theological virtue of charity can enable infused cardinal virtues. Only true, moral virtue can exist where charity is lacking.

Additionally, cf. *Dignitatis Humanae* §1: “Religious freedom, in turn, which men demand as necessary to fulfill their duty to worship God, has to do with immunity from coercion in civil society. Therefore, it leaves untouched traditional Catholic doctrine on the moral duty of men and societies toward the true religion and toward the one Church of Christ”. If Rahner’s thesis is true, then an AC society would seem, by implication, to fulfill *invisibly* DH’s call to all men and women to fulfill their duty toward true religion. This might raise difficulty with Congar’s attribution of “legitimacy” to non-Christian religions. I am indebted, again, to Barrett H. Turner for these last two insights.

But also, cf. Érich Mahieu. Introduction // Congar. *My Journal of the Council*, pp. 20-21, who notes that Congar was very active in the composition of DH: “In this case, Congar worked on the paragraphs dealing with the basis of this freedom in Revelation. But above all he worked actively in putting the finishing touches to a new preamble that stated from the outset the mission of evangelisation and the duty that everyone has to seek religious truth. This preamble would also rally the support of all those who feared, as Congar himself feared, that the decree might favour indifferentism.” So, like Rahner, Congar’s thoughts on the AC are subject to misapplication (that is, readers allow themselves to fall into apathy).

⁴⁴ Ironically, it is not so clear that Rahner would support this analogous application; cf. Rahner. *Observations on the Problem*, p. 281; nor would de Lubac.

⁴⁵ Jacques Maritain. *The Person and the Common Good* / trans. J. J. Fitzgerald. Notre Dame, IN 1947, pp. 87, 81; cf. 61, 66, 70.

Rahner never wavers in the absolute insistence he places on Christ as the center of and gateway into salvation, along with the Church's absolute inclusion in Christ's salvific efficacy. In both substance and especially in this insistence Congar is in agreement with Rahner, as well as in the belief both hold that salvation is open to non-Christians, in line with Vatican II.

Returning briefly to the original problem that gave rise to Rahner's thesis of the AC: with the radical declaration of LG §16,

when we have to keep in mind both principles together, namely the necessity of Christian faith and the universal salvific will of God's love and omnipotence, we can only reconcile them by saying that somehow all men must be capable of being members of the Church; and this capacity must not be understood merely in the sense of an abstract and purely logical possibility, but as a real and historically concrete one.⁴⁶

Congar makes a similar, parallel presentation of poles needing to be held in tension: "The first of these principles is the necessity of a belief God who rewards and punishes; the second is God's will for salvation of all."⁴⁷ These presentations of the problem makes it compellingly unavoidable. Rahner's thesis of the anonymous Christian is certainly not out of line with Vatican II and has a strong basis in it, despite the problems which may be drawn out from it under a sustained reflection (or are wrongly drawn by others) outside its conciliar foundation.

Christ became man, suffered, died, and rose so that men would have life, and have it more abundantly – not just those who have had the benefit of encountering this truth. It is the Church's responsibility to do Her utmost to share the good news of this abundant life, and this truth remains eternally valid, and the fact that there are invincibly ignorant men and women who may nevertheless be saved by grace despite never hearing this news explicitly *cannot* be subjected to a rationalization which in spirit holds that such men and women do not "need" to hear the Gospel. Such a mentality leads only to a loss of charity, and thus to the risk of losing salvation even for the baptized and believing Christian.

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⁴⁶ Rahner. Anonymous Christian, p. 391.

⁴⁷ Congar. Salvation and the Non-Catholic, p. 291.

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**НАДІЯ, ЩО ВСІ МОЖУТЬ СПАСТИСЯ: ПЕРЕОСМИСЛЕННЯ
І СПІЛЬНЕ ЧИТАННЯ З КОНґАРОМ «АНОНІМНОГО ХРИСТІЯНИНА»
КАРЛА РАНЕРА**

У світлі спаду євангелізаційного запалу в епоху після II Ватиканського собору ідея «анонімного християнина» Карла Ранера викликала багато недоброчливості. Однак Ранер наполегливо стверджує, що існування цього явища є необхідним наслідком розробленого II Ватиканським собором учення щодо міжрелігійного богослов'я і постійного визнання Церквою Ісуса Христа як єдиного посередника спасіння. Ранер знаходить неявного союзника в особі Іва Конґара, який виявляв особливий інтерес до спасіння нехристиян і легітимності нехристиянських релігій. Він по суті погоджується з Ранером, але відкидає назву, яку обрав його колега-єзуїт. У статті розглянуто кілька відповідних документів II Ватиканського собору, щоб показати значення і правдиву цінність тези Раннера.

Ключові слова: Карл Ранер, Ів Конґар, анонімний християнин, II Ватиканський собор, євангелізація.