

Does Karl Rahner Derive His Axiom, “The Economic Trinity *is* the Immanent Trinity and Vice Versa,” from Premises Inconsistent with Classical, Christian Orthodoxy?¹

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ABSTRACT: The *Grundaxiom* of Karl Rahner’s theology of the Trinity, “the economic Trinity *is* the immanent Trinity and vice versa,” has attained widespread acceptance among contemporary theologians. Rahner derives this axiom, however, from premises inconsistent with the doctrines of divine transcendence and the inspiration of Scripture, as traditionally understood. In this paper, prescinding from the questions of whether other arguments might be proposed in defense of Rahner’s axiom or, indeed, of whether the axiom itself is true, we intend to demonstrate that Rahner’s two, principal arguments on its behalf fail to establish its correctness when judged from a classically orthodox, Christian perspective.

I. INTRODUCTION

“The economic Trinity *is* the immanent Trinity and vice versa.”² This statement, the *Grundaxiom* of Karl Rahner’s theology of the Trinity, expresses, according to Walter Kasper, “a broad consensus among the theologians of the various churches.”³ In this paper, we intend to erode that consensus somewhat without, however, subjecting Rahner’s axiom to a comprehensive critique. We hope merely to establish that Rahner derives his thesis from premises inconsistent with the doctrines of divine transcendence and the inspiration of Scripture, as traditionally understood.

II. THE MEANING OF RAHNER’S AXIOM

Before discussing the premises from which Rahner derives his *Grundaxiom*, however, it behooves us briefly to state what Rahner’s *Grundaxiom* means. By the statement, “the economic Trinity *is* the immanent Trinity, and vice versa,” Rahner

¹ An earlier version of this paper was delivered at a conference for graduate students in theology and religious studies held at the University of Edinburgh on June 7, 2002. In the following, *MS* = *Mysterium Salutis: Grundriss heilsgeschichtlicher Dogmatik* 1-5 (Johannes Feiner and Magnus Löhrer, ed.; Einsiedeln: Benziger, 1965-81); *SmtWk* = *Sämtliche Werke* 2-4, 8, 15, 17, 26, and 27 (Karl Lehmann, Johannes B. Metz, Karl-Heinz Neufeld, Albert Raffelt, and Herbert Vorgrimler, ed.; Freiburg: Herder, 1995-); *SzTh* = *Schriften zur Theologie* 1-16 (Einsiedeln: Benziger, 1954-84); and *TI* = *Theological Investigations* 1-23 (Cornelius Ernst et al, trans.; London: DLT, 1961-92).

² “Oneness and Threefoldness of God in Discussion with Islam” [“Oneness and Threefoldness”], *TI* xviii, 105-21 at 114; “Einzigkeit und Dreifaltigkeit im Gespräch mit dem Islam” [“Einzigkeit und Dreifaltigkeit”], *SzTh* xiii, 129-47 at 139. “We are all aware,” writes Catherine M. LaCugna, “that ‘economic Trinity’ is the theological term given to the salvific acts of God *ad extra*, and ‘immanent Trinity’ refers to distinctions of relation within God’s own being” (“Re-conceiving the Trinity as the Mystery of Salvation,” *SJT* 38 [1984], 1-23 at 10).

³ *The God of Jesus Christ* (London: SCM, 1983), 274.

means that divine self-communication “can, if occurring in freedom, occur only in the intra-divine manner of the two communications of the one divine essence by the Father to the Son and the Spirit.”⁴ In other words, the immanent constitution of the Trinity forms a kind of *a priori* law for the divine self-communication *ad extra* such that the structure of the latter necessarily corresponds to the structure of the former.

III. RAHNER’S ARGUMENTS FOR HIS AXIOM

That such a correspondence must obtain, however, is by no means self-evident. Rahner, after all, admits the possibility of change in God in his famous, dialectical formula: “he who is not subject to change himself can *himself* be subject to change *in something else*.”⁵ If God could alter other facets of his being in something else, parity of reasoning suggests that he could also alter the relations between his modes of subsistence. God’s simplicity,⁶ as classically understood, moreover, would seem to dictate that changes in other facets of God’s being could not leave the Trinitarian relations untouched. For, if God is simple, i.e. absolutely uncomposed, then every aspect of his being is essentially, though not necessarily relatively, identical with every other; hence the slightest change in any aspect of a simple God would transform every aspect of that God. It seems, then, that the relations between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit could hardly escape the comprehensive metamorphosis entailed by divine becoming. Such becoming, however, forms an indispensable prerequisite to divine self-communication as Rahner conceives of it: i.e. “the act whereby God goes out of himself into ‘the other’ in such a way that he bestows himself upon the other by becoming the other.”⁷

⁴ *The Trinity* (Joseph Donceel, trans.; New York: Herder, 1970), 36; “Der dreifaltige Gott als transzendenter Urgrund der Heilsgeschichte” [“Der dreifaltige Gott”] in *MS* ii, 317-401 at 338.

⁵ *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity [Foundations]* (William V. Dych, trans.; New York: Crossroad, 1978), 220; *Grundkurs des Glaubens: Einführung in den Begriff des Christentums [Grundkurs]* in *SmtWk* xxvi, 3-442 at 212. Rahner’s commentators have reached little consensus as to what Rahner means when he writes that God “is not subject to change himself.” They agree overwhelmingly, however, that Rahner ascribes a radical mutability to God insofar as he communicates himself to the world. Cf., for instance, Joseph Wong, *Logos-Symbol in the Christology of Karl Rahner* (BSRel 61; Rome: LAS, 1984), 154-7, 181-4, 198-9, 244-8; Klaus Fischer, *Der Mensch als Geheimnis: Die Anthropologie Karl Rahners* (ÖF.S 5; Freiburg: Herder, 1974), 348-52; Michael Schulz, *Sein und Trinität: Systematische Erörterungen zur Religionsphilosophie G. W. F. Hegels im ontologiegeschichtlichen Rückblick auf J. Duns Scotus und I. Kant und die Hegel-Rezeption in der Seinsauslegung und Trinitätstheologie bei W. Pannenberg, E. Jüngel, K. Rahner und H. U. v. Balthasar* (MThS.S 53; St. Ottilien: EOS, 1997), 655-62; Heinrich Springhorn, *Immanenz Gottes und Transzendenz der Welt: Eine Analyse zur systematischen Theologie von Karl Rahner und Wolfhart Pannenberg* (THEOS—Studienreihe Theologische Forschungsergebnisse 48; Hamburg: Dr. Kovač, 2001), 104-7; and Richard Brosse, *Jésus, L’Histoire de Dieu: Historicité et devenir: deux notions clés de la théologie de Karl Rahner* (SF NS 82; Fribourg, Suisse: Éditions Universitaires, 1996), 233-8.

⁶ Rahner plainly accepts the doctrine of divine simplicity. Cf. *Trinity*, 69, 102, n. 21; “Der dreifaltige Gott,” *MS* ii, 362, 384, Anm. 21. He just as plainly interprets it, however, in an unconventional sense. Cf. *ibid.*, 103; *ebd.*, 384.

⁷ “The Concept of Mystery in Catholic Theology,” *TI* iv, 36-73 at 68; “Über den Begriff des Geheimnisses in der katholischen Theologie,” *SzTh* iv, 51-99 at 93.

1. *The argument from divine self-communication.* Rahner contends, nevertheless, in the first of his two, principal arguments for the *Grundaxiom* of his theology of the Trinity, that precisely because God communicates himself in the Rahnerian sense of that term, the relations intrinsic to that communication necessarily correspond to the eternal relations of the immanent Trinity. “The differentiation of the self-communication of God...must,” he writes, “belong to God ‘in himself’, or otherwise this difference...would do away with God’s *self-communication*.”⁸ Rahner, indeed, seems to regard asymmetry between God’s eternal relations and his communicated relations as self-evidently incompatible with a genuine self-communication of God. Accordingly, he neglects to prove the incompatibility of asymmetrical relations with self-communication at least when arguing “from below,” i.e. exclusively from the data supplied by salvation history.

a. *The theology of the symbol.* Rahner offers the beginnings of an argument that genuine self-communication entails this incompatibility, however, in his “Theology of the Symbol:”⁹ an essay in which Rahner attempts to illumine the theology of the Trinity “from above”¹⁰ with the aid of his ontology of symbol.¹¹

“All beings,” Rahner writes near the outset of this essay, “are by their nature symbolic, because they necessarily ‘express’ themselves in order to attain their own nature.”¹² The attainment of nature to which Rahner refers coincides substantially, in his view, with the “Being present to itself”¹³ which he identifies in his metaphysics of knowledge as the “intrinsic self-realization”¹⁴ of being.

A being attains this state, according to Rahner, by differentiating itself from itself without dividing itself into two distinct beings. When he claims that a being “necessarily ‘expresses’ itself,”¹⁵ therefore, he means that “each being forms...something distinct from itself and yet one with itself”¹⁶ in such a way that “unity and distinction are correlatives which increase in like proportions, not in

⁸ *Trinity*, 99-100; “Der dreifaltige Gott,” *MS* ii, 382. Cf. *Foundations*, 137; *Grundkurs, SmtWk* xxvi, 135; and “The Mystery of the Trinity,” *TI* xvi, 255-9 at 258; “Um das Geheimnis der Dreifaltigkeit,” *SzTh* xii, 320-25 at 323.

⁹ [“Symbol”] *TI* iv, 221-52; “Zur Theologie des Symbols” [“Theologie des Symbols”], *SzTh* iv, 275-311.

¹⁰ The very need to invoke the theology of the symbol in order to justify Rahner’s axiom suggests the difficulty, if not futility, of an exclusively “economic” approach to the theology of the Trinity. As Nancy Dallavalle observes, “the problem with using the theology of the symbol...as ‘proof’ of the axiom is that the theology of the symbol is based on speculative assertions whereas the axiom was formulated to highlight the economy” (“Revisiting Rahner: On the Theological Status of Trinitarian Theology,” *ITQ* 63 [1998], 133-50 at 140).

¹¹ For brief accounts of this ontology, cf. Wong, *Logos-Symbol*, 74-98 and Peter Eicher, *Die anthropologische Wende: Karl Rahners philosophischer Weg vom Wesen des Menschen zur personalen Existenz* (Freiburg [Schweiz]: Universitätsverlag, 1970), 173-88, 305-7.

¹² “Symbol,” *TI* iv, 224; “Theologie des Symbols,” *SzTh* iv, 278.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 229; *ebd.*, 284.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*; *ebd.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*; *ebd.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 228; *ebd.*, 283.

inverse proportions which would reduce each to be contradictory and exclusive of the other.”¹⁷

This claim that a being must differentiate itself in order to attain presence-to-itself follows naturally from Rahner’s metaphysics of knowledge according to which “knowing is the being-present-to-self of being, and this being-present-to-self is the being of the existent.”¹⁸ The idea of self-differentiation for the sake of presence-to-self, specifically, immunizes Rahner’s ontology against a classic objection to the very idea of presence-to-self, which, in Rahner’s view, constitutes the very “meaning” of being. This objection appears in, perhaps, its most pointed form in the *Third Theological Oration* of Gregory of Nazianzus. In the process of mocking his Eunomian opponents, Gregory writes:

Here is another teaser for you to solve: were you present to yourself when you were being begotten and are you present to yourself now, or are both propositions false? If you were and are present, who is present to whom? How did the pair of you come to be a single whole? If both alternatives are false, how is it that you came to be parted from yourself and what caused the separation? No, it is stupid to stir up a dust about whether a thing is present to itself or not. The expression “is present” is used to imply a relationship with other things not with itself.¹⁹

Rahner, in attempting to overcome this difficulty, attributes to every being the capacity to produce an internal other, which he describes as its “symbol.” A being’s symbol, according to Rahner, is: a) present to the original being itself; and b) in one sense distinct from it; and yet c) in another sense identical with it in such a way that, *pace* Gregory, one can meaningfully ascribe to a being presence-to-itself in its symbol. Since, according to Rahner’s ontology, being as such *is* presence-to-self; and since one must differentiate oneself in order to become present to oneself; Rahner holds that God, who is pure being and pure presence-to-self, must constitute the supreme exemplar of self-differentiation for the sake of presence-to-self. “Being *as such*,” Rahner writes, “emerges into a plurality—of which the supreme mode is the Trinity.”²⁰

That which emerges from the Father in this process, his divine “other” or “symbol,” Rahner identifies as the Logos. Through the Logos, according to Rahner, the Father attains presence to himself, at least in terms of knowledge. “The Word,” he writes:

is ‘generated’ by the Father as the image and expression of the Father..., [and] this process is necessarily given with the divine act of self-knowledge....The Logos is [thus] the ‘symbol’ of the Father in the very sense which we have given the word: the inward symbol which remains distinct from what is

¹⁷ Ibid.; ebd..

¹⁸ *Spirit in the World* [SW] (Johannes B. Metz, ed., William V. Dych, trans.; New York: Herder, 1968), 69; *Geist in Welt: Zur Metaphysik der endlichen Erkenntnis bei Thomas von Aquin* [GW] in *SmtWk* ii, 5-300 at 62.

¹⁹ *Or. 29.9 in Faith Gives Fullness to Reasoning: The Five Theological Orations of Gregory Nazianzen* (Lionel Wickham and Frederick Williams, trans.; Frederick W. Norris, intro. and comm.; Leiden: Brill, 1991), 250.

²⁰ “Symbol,” *TI* iv, 228; “Theologie des Symbols,” *SzTh* iv, 282.

symbolized, which is constituted by what is symbolized, where what is symbolized expresses itself and possesses itself.²¹

The Logos, therefore, consists, in Rahner's view, in what comes to be when the Father expresses himself in order to be present to himself in knowledge. The Holy Spirit, Rahner seems to think, enables the Father similarly to attain presence-to-self in love. "We are allowed...to connect," writes Rahner, "in a special and specific way, the intra-divine procession of the Logos from the Father with God's knowledge, and the procession of the Spirit from the Father through the Son with God's love."²²

Rahner, moreover, considers God's self-communication *ad extra* a continuation of the processions which constitute his being itself. "The immanent self-utterance of God in his eternal fullness," Rahner claims, "is the condition of the self-utterance of God outside himself, and the latter continues the former."²³ Again, Rahner writes, "It is because God 'must' 'express' himself inwardly that he can also express himself outwardly; the finite, created utterance *ad extra* is a continuation of the immanent constitution of 'image and likeness'—a free continuation because its object is finite—and takes place in fact through the Logos (Jn 1:3)."²⁴ Even creation, then, which Rahner considers a "deficient mode"²⁵ of divine self-communication, constitutes a prolongation of the divine processions into the world.

b. The argument itself. That the processions must relate to each other in their communication to creatures *precisely* as they relate to each other in the eternal Godhead seems to follow, according to Rahner, from the purpose for which God communicates himself: viz. to enable human beings to behold him "as he is" (1 John 3:2).²⁶ The Logos, as we have seen, constitutes, in Rahner's view, the exclusive

²¹ *Ibid.*, 236; *ibid.*, 292. Rahner does, indeed, criticize the Augustinian psychological analogy of the Trinity in *Trinity*, 117-20; "Der dreifaltige Gott," *MS* ii, 395-6; in *Foundations*, 135, 137; *Grundkurs, SmtWk* xxvi, 134, 136; and in "Oneness and Threefoldness," *TI* xviii, 112; "Einzigkeit und Dreifaltigkeit," *SzTh* xiii, 137. He unquestionably adopts in "Symbol," however, a psychological, though not Augustinian, approach to the doctrine of the Trinity which he makes more explicit in *Trinity*, 93, 96, 116-17; "Der dreifaltige Gott," *MS* ii, 378, 393-4; and "Oneness and Threefoldness," *TI* xviii, 112; "Einzigkeit und Dreifaltigkeit," *SzTh* xiii, 137.

²² *Trinity*, 116; "Der dreifaltige Gott," *MS* ii, 394. Cf. also Rahner's "On the Theology of Hope," *TI* x, 242-59 at 245-6; "Zur Theologie der Hoffnung," *SzTh* viii, 561-79 at 564-5.

²³ "On the Theology of the Incarnation" ["Incarnation"], *TI* iv, 105-20 at 115; "Zur Theologie der Menschwerdung" ["Menschwerdung"], *SzTh* iv, 137-55 at 149.

²⁴ "Symbol," *ibid.*, 236-7; "Theologie des Symbols," *ibid.*, 293.

²⁵ *Foundations*, 122; *Grundkurs, SmtWk* xxvi, 122.

²⁶ One ought to identify the purpose of divine self-communication, even in this life, as the bestowal of the beatific vision, Rahner argues, partially because of the testimony of Scripture. "The possession of the Pneuma (and thus primarily uncreated grace)," he writes, "is conceived of in Scripture as the homogeneous germ and commencement of the beatific vision" ("Some Implications of the Scholastic Concept of Uncreated Grace," *TI* i, 319-46 at 334; "Zur scholastischen Begrifflichkeit der ungeschaffenen Gnade," *SzTh* i, 347-75 at 362). Likewise, Rahner asserts, "according to Scripture, the possession of the Spirit is the earnest and firstfruits of the definitive beatifying bestowal of God's grace and mercy; thus it is not just its pledge and legal title, but a commencement of glory, still hidden, no doubt, only present to consciousness in faith, but really and entitatively given already" (*ibid.*, 326; *ibid.*, 354). For the philosophical basis of Rahner's views on this subject, cf. n. 29.

means by which the Father knows himself. If even the Father cannot know himself without being ontologically united to the Logos, it seems unlikely that human beings could accomplish such a feat in the absence of this divine symbol. If, then, the Father genuinely wishes for human beings to know him as he is, Rahner believes, he will undoubtedly reveal to them the Logos.

Now, Rahner's ontology commits him to the view that "being and knowing are the same."²⁷ It follows from this that something can be known only to the extent that "the knower in the true sense and the known in the true sense are one and identical in being."²⁸ In Rahner's view, therefore, the Father can reveal the Logos to human beings only by ontologically communicating the divine being, with which the Logos is objectively identical and which he shares with the other divine persons and with which they too are objectively identical, to human persons. Here, of course, one encounters the dilemma that moved us to introduce the theology of the symbol: if Rahner holds that a simple God must change in his self-communication, how can he plausibly hold that the triune, relational structure of this God remains unchanged in the process of self-communication?

Rahner's theology of the symbol suggests a relatively simple answer to this question. God's relational structure remains unaltered, because, otherwise, divine self-communication could not enable human beings to enjoy the beatific vision. To elaborate: if the Father desires to manifest himself precisely as he existed, at least *qua* relative, at some point preceding his self-communication, then, according to Rahner's principles, he must not allow the process of self-communication to alter his symbol, the Logos, at least insofar as he relates to the Father, in any way. Since the Son is objectively identical with his relations to the Father and the Spirit, they too must remain unchanged, at least insofar as they relate to the Son. If one equates the beatific vision with the vision of the Father as he existed before communicating himself, then, it seems that divine self-communication cannot enable human beings to enjoy the beatific vision if God's relational structure mutates during this communication in any way.

Divine self-communication, however, unquestionably does enable human beings to enjoy the beatific vision. Hence, Rahner reasons, a divine self-communication that bestows the beatific vision never alters God's relational structure. By virtue of the identity of being and knowing, however, divine self-communication, in Rahner's view, always tends in some degree to bestow the beatific vision.²⁹ Rahner concludes, therefore, that God's relational structure never changes even when he himself changes in some way in order to communicate himself to human beings: which is roughly equivalent to saying "the economic Trinity *is* the immanent Trinity and vice versa." The controversial character of the premises from which Rahner reaches this

²⁷ *SW*, 69; *GW*, *SmtWk* ii, 62.

²⁸ "Thomas Aquinas on Truth," *TI* xiii, 13-31 at 29; "Die Wahrheit bei Thomas von Aquin," *SmtWk* ii, 303-316 at 315.

²⁹ "If being is being-present-to-self," Rahner writes, "if the essence of an existent insofar as it has being is personal self-possession and inner luminosity, if every lesser degree of existence can only be understood as a deficient, delimited and reduced mode of the presence of being, then the ontological self-communication of God to a creature is by definition a communication for the sake of immediate knowledge and love" (*Foundations*, 122; *Grundkurs*, *SmtWk* xxvi, 122). In Rahner's view, consequently, "what grace and vision of God mean are two phases of one and the same event" (*ibid.*, 118; *ebd.*, 118).

conclusion casts considerable doubt, of course, on the soundness³⁰ of the foregoing argument, Rahner's first, principal rationale for his *Grundaxiom*. Considered *prima facie*, however, it seems at least approximately valid.³¹

2. *The argument from the possibility of deriving the doctrine of the Trinity from salvation history.* In his second, principal argument for the *Grundaxiom* of his theology of the Trinity, Rahner claims that the axiom must hold true, because, otherwise, one could not infer the existence of the immanent Trinity from the economy of salvation. "For him who rejects our basic thesis," Rahner writes, "the Trinity can *only* be something which, as long as we do not contemplate it immediately in its absolute 'in itself', can be told about in purely conceptual statements, in a merely *verbal* revelation, as opposed to God's *salvific activity* in us."³²

One can fully appreciate the import of this sentence only when one recognizes that Rahner's view of divine action precludes the possibility of God's intervening in the psyches of the human authors of Scripture in order to convey otherwise unknowable truths. If one wishes to speak of divine intervention at all, Rahner writes:

[such] a special "intervention" of God...can only be understood as the historical concreteness of the transcendental self-communication of God which is always already [*immer schon*] intrinsic to the concrete world:...the becoming historical and concrete of that "intervention" in which God as the transcendental ground of the world has from the outset embedded himself in this world as its self-communicating ground.³³

Rahner, accordingly, seeks to construe the idea of revelation in such a way that it does not presuppose the possibility of God's intervening in the creaturely domain. Eschewing the doctrine of verbal inspiration, at least as traditionally understood, Rahner regards particular writings or historical events as revelatory only insofar as they mediate the transcendental experience of God's self-communicating grace. In his words, "one can without hesitation view the material contents of historical revelation as verbalized objectifications of the 'revelation' which is already present in the gratuitous radicalizing of human transcendentality in God's self-communication."³⁴

If the economy of salvation, "God's salvific activity in us," does not supply the data necessary to derive the doctrine of the Trinity, then this can only mean, for Rahner, that God has revealed no such doctrine. Rahner's argument from the possibility of deriving the doctrine of the Trinity from the economy of salvation thus resolves itself into an argument from the non-occurrence of verbal revelation. If, Rahner argues: a) verbal revelation never occurs; and b) the church nonetheless

³⁰ "An argument is SOUND," write Colin Allen and Michael Hand, "if and only if it is valid and all its premises are true...It follows that all sound arguments have true conclusions" (*Logic Primer* [Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 2001²], 2).

³¹ "An argument is VALID if and only if it is necessary that *if* all its premises are true, its conclusions are true" (*ibid.*, 1).

³² *Trinity*, 39; "Der dreifaltige Gott," *MS* ii, 340.

³³ *Foundations*, 87; *Grundkurs*, *SmtWk* xxvi, 87-8. We have inserted "always" to represent Rahner's *immer*, which Dych leaves untranslated.

³⁴ "The Act of Faith and the Content of Faith," *TI* xxi, 151-61 at 158; "Glaubensakt und Glaubensinhalt," *SzTh* xv, 152-62 at 158.

knows the doctrine of the Trinity to be true; then c) the church must possess the capacity to prove this doctrine true without appealing to a verbal revelation. If d) the economy of salvation constitutes the only possible source of knowledge about the Trinity besides a verbal revelation; then e) the economy of salvation, by itself, must supply all the data necessary for a valid inference to the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity. While this argument, like the first, relies on at least one controversial premise, it seems, like the first, at least approximately valid.

IV. CONCLUSION

Rahner seeks to warrant his *Grundaxiom*, “the economic Trinity *is* the immanent Trinity and vice versa,”³⁵ then, with two, principal, more or less valid arguments: the first, from the radically self-communicative character of divine grace, and the second, from the possibility of a purely economic foundation for the theology of the Trinity.

No one who affirms God’s absolute transcendence from his creation, it seems, can reasonably assent to the first argument, that from grace as self-communicative. For “the term ‘self-communication’,” at least as Rahner employs it, “is...intended to signify that God in his own most proper reality makes himself the innermost constitutive element of man.”³⁶ Such an idea of grace not only vitiates the Biblical and traditional view of divine transcendence. It also renders problematic any soteriology that describes human beings as fallen creatures in need of reconciliation to an upright Creator. If “man is the event of God’s absolute self-communication,”³⁷ after all, one can call him a sinner only at the risk of sacrilege. In view of divine self-communication, Rahner writes, “Man is forbidden to belittle himself, because to do so would be to belittle God.”³⁸ Rahner’s idea of divine self-communication, then, appears very much to endanger the doctrine of divine transcendence and other Christian doctrines closely related to it. The argument that the self-communicative character of divine grace implies the identity of the economic and the immanent Trinity, then, can possess no binding force for those who adhere to a classical understanding of divine transcendence and, therefore, deny that grace is self-communicative in the relevant sense.³⁹

Likewise, no one who regards the existence of verbal revelation, in the classical sense of the term, as an integral article of the Christian faith can accept Rahner’s argument from the possibility of deriving the doctrine of the Trinity from the economy of salvation: an argument that presupposes the absence of all verbal

³⁵ “Oneness and Threefoldness,” *TI* xviii, 114; “Einzigkeit und Dreifaltigkeit,” *SzTh* xiii, 139.

³⁶ *Foundations*, 116; *Grundkurs*, *SmtWk* xxvi, 116. One may and ought to maintain that God communicates himself to the regenerate in a certain sense (cf. John 14:17, 23; Rom 5:5; 1 Cor 3:16; 6:19; 2 Cor 1:22; 5:5; 6:16; Eph 1:13-14; 2 Tim 1:13; 2 Pet 1:4, etc.). Nevertheless, the spiritual communion which believers enjoy with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in no way renders God a “constitutive element” of his finite, contingent, and imperfect creation.

³⁷ *Foundations*, 119; *Grundkurs*, *SmtWk* xxvi, 119.

³⁸ “Incarnation,” *TI* iv, 116; “Menschwerdung,” *SzTh* iv, 150.

³⁹ One cannot rescue Rahner’s argument, incidentally, by substituting an orthodox view of divine self-communication for Rahner’s exaggerated conception. For if one denied Rahner’s claim that divine self-communication constitutes *per definitionem* an extension of the intra-Trinitarian processions *ad extra*, one would seem to possess no compelling reason for claiming that this self-communication must exhibit a relational structure that corresponds precisely to that of the eternal, divine processions.

revelation. Some maintain, of course, that Scripture describes God's saving acts, and not his very being, so that, whether Scripture is verbally inspired or not, the doctrine of the immanent Trinity derives entirely from the economy of salvation.

One can hold such a position, however, only at the expense of ignoring numerous passages which characterize in unmistakable terms aspects of the immanent Trinity: e.g., John 1:1, 2; 8:58; Phil 2:6; Col 1:17; Heb 1:3; 9:14. One who considers these and similar passages divinely inspired, therefore, cannot reasonably assent to the claim that the knowability of the doctrine of the immanent Trinity depends entirely upon the possibility of deriving this doctrine solely from the economy of salvation. Yet Rahner's second argument for his *Grundaxiom* presupposes precisely this claim. Like the first argument, it seems to possess no binding force for those who uphold the classical doctrines of divine transcendence and Biblical inspiration. From the perspective of the adherents of these doctrines, then, Rahner supplies insufficient grounds for his claim that "the economic Trinity *is* the immanent Trinity and vice versa."⁴⁰

⁴⁰ "Oneness and Threefoldness," *TI* xviii, 114; "Einzigkeit und Dreifaltigkeit," *SzTh* xiii, 139.