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Envisioning the Church of *Secular Age*: Lessons from Charles Taylor and Karl Rahner

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Abstract: The process of envisioning of the church in the modern world demands a greater understanding of the complementarity of gospel and history. Actual and objective understanding of the secular world will always nourish the establishment of the church of this age and of the future. Karl Rahner and Charles Taylor provide a comprehensive treatment of the importance of understanding both history and the gospel to envision a church that is relevant to the time. Charles Taylor paying particular attention to the historical development of last 500 years in the western world and examines how it turned as a predicament to the church of today. Similarly, Karl Rahner's analysis of 'the shape of the Church to come' also depicts the significance of a comprehensive and unbiased understanding of history and a prophetic awareness of the gospel as inevitable in the setting of a proper futuristic vision of the church. Comprehensive study of the analysis of the history by Taylor and Rahner

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assures us a strong foundation to envision a better church for today and tomorrow.

Keywords: Karl Rahner, Charles Taylor, Shape of the Church to Come, Secular Age, Disenchantment, Little flock.

Introduction

The fundamental question that my paper attempts to address is: Do we genuinely need a proper theological understanding of the relationship between the church and the modern world? This understanding may avoid the tendency to dichotomize the two and give a better design of mutuality between the two. God has had a luxurious space in all throughout the ages of humanity, either by being vigorously proclaimed or by causing disputes. At the same time, history has witnessed attempts to question God's might and eminence as well. But, for the first time in the history of humanity, the very existence of God is threatened because of the indifference of

Karl Rahner, in his theology, exposes a world that is fundamentally graced. Since the world is the product of God's desire to communicate with himself, it is intrinsically graced. Rahner developed his theology of the Church on behalf of this world in which God communicates himself. Rahner says that in this world, the church has got prophetic and dialogical functions.

human beings and their search for better choices. Charles Taylor asks: "Why was it virtually impossible not to believe in God in, say, 1500 in our Western society, while in 2000 many of us find this not only easy, but even inescapable?" (Taylor, 2007:25). Taylor's formulation of the above question has not

only got the intention of comparing Middle Ages and modern times, rather he wants to affirm that they are indivisibly interconnected. Instead, or in contrast to the past, now we live in a world of “a purely self-sufficient humanism which has come to be a widely available option” (Taylor, 2007: 18).

Karl Rahner, in his theology, exposes a world that is fundamentally graced. Since the world is the product of God’s desire to communicate with himself, it is intrinsically graced. Rahner developed his theology of the Church on behalf of this world in which God communicates himself. Rahner says that in this world, the church has got prophetic and dialogical functions. Rahner believes this function is imperative. It cannot be professed solely on the basis of unchallenged statements of faith or dogmatic council documents. Rather, it must be worked out in the light of a real and adequate understanding of the fast-changing intellectual, social, and political situations of the world. In his book (1983), *The Shape of the Church to Come*, Rahner raises three basic questions in order to give a better understanding of the mission of the church in today’s as well as tomorrow’s world: Where do we stand? What are we to do? How can the church of the future be envisioned? Rahner was always known for introducing new methods of approaching solutions to existing problems. He has come up with the compatibility of having a deep sense of history and a prophetic understanding of the gospel to shape the role of the church in the modern world.

For Rahner, today’s church cannot simply move along with the predicaments of past glory and dogmatic imperatives. Rather, it needs to have a proper sense of the time and smell of the state. Directives and guidelines for the church and the world should be formulated in the light of the comprehensive understanding of history, dogmatic revelations, and the constant changes of society.

Today's church needs an extra courage to have an "ultimately charismatically inspired, creative imagination" (Rahner, 1983: 47) to envision the church of today as well as tomorrow. I suggest that both Rahner and Taylor, although maybe not immediately recognizable, share similar concerns about their respective projects (Horan, 2013: 21). Rahner and Taylor provide a comprehensive treatment of the importance of understanding both history and the gospel in order to

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envision a church that is relevant to the world. This paper is organized into two parts, with a conclusion. First, I narrate the version of the understanding of the *Secular Age* by Charles Taylor, paying particular attention to the historical development of the last 500 years in the western world and the way it affected the Church. Secondly, I examine the findings and suggestions of Karl Rahner towards the shaping of the Church in Modern Secular Times. In conclusion, I would like to put forth that the reading of Taylor and Rahner together assures us of a strong foundation to envision a better church for today and tomorrow.

The Secular Age and Christendom by Charles Taylor

Taylor dedicated himself to explaining the history of the rise of secularism in the modern Western world. His explanation was widely appreciated because of its novelty and subtleness. In his story of explanation of the rise of secularism in the modern western world, he has set aside ample space for religions and beliefs. For him, western secularism is not completely alien to religions and beliefs, especially those of Christendom. It

doesn't mean that he acknowledges a complete accommodation of religion and faith in secularism. Rather, he unravels the rise of secular modernity in the process of its negation of conventional religious forms and beliefs. He was not ready to formulate his theory of the secularization of the modern world without pointing out its religious lineage. Our sense of where we are is crucially defined in part by a story of how we got there. In that sense, there is an inescapable (though often negative) God-reference in the very nature of our secular age. And just because we describe where we are in relation to the journey, we can misdescribe it grievously by misidentifying the itinerary ” (Taylor, 2007: 29).

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Taylor's understanding of religion evolved from his "intellectual travelogue spanning five hundred years of Western cultural history, explaining how we got from the 16th century, when belief was assumed, to our day when unbelief seems to many a reasonable option" (Shantz, 2009). At the outset, it would be better to know that he has formulated his analysis of secularization and religious transformation over the centuries, locating himself mainly in Europe (England and France) and the U.S.A. It doesn't mean that his findings have nothing to do with other regions of the world. Rather, it is a well-edified story derived from the west that sensibly speaks to the whole world. He articulates it in the following way: his analysis is "tacking back and forth between the analytical and the historical" (Taylor, 2007: 29). He formulated his current religious concepts based on the transformation of religions over centuries.

What happened between 1500 and 2000? Taylor (2007) notes that these three features – "the natural world they lived in, which had its

place in the cosmos they imagined, testified to divine purpose and action; a society could only be conceived as grounded in something higher than mere human action in secular time; a world of enchantment where people lived” (Taylor, 2007: 25) and has vanished (Taylor, 2007: 26). A world that was told in favour of belief and made the presence of God seemingly undeniable shifted to a platform for alternatives to God and beliefs. The cosmos, which was explained by God’s design, got transferred to scientific experiments and proofs. Taylor depicts this historical evolution and transformation of the world that produced such a massive change in the place of religion and belief. According to Taylor, the Reformation and the development of modern science caused this transformation. In the course of history, we see five major changes that happened in society after the Reformation and the development of modern science. They are (Taylor, 2007:29):

- i) Replacement of the old idea of cosmos
- ii) Undoing of a Religious understanding of time
- iii) Undoing of the way earlier society could hold profound tensions in equilibrium
- iv) Undoing of a social world interwoven with ritual and worship
- v) Disenchantment

According to Taylor, secularization has resulted in disenchantment and a decline in the level of understanding of some of the great languages of transcendence. He says a massive unlearning is taking place in the modern world. Simultaneously, exclusive humanism has caused people to move away from their ancestral churches without breaking them away entirely. They prefer to believe without belonging. Taylor sees the deep sense of being menaced by religious fanaticism which rejects sensual and earthly life, the strong attraction of religions towards the idea of being part of a greater whole, and the cross pressure of science and transcendence that

pushes people to unbelief. It is in this context that he positions the Church of today to play a more sympathetic and understanding role toward people and positions that differ from our own.

Believers of this age demand new ways of inhabiting their faith. People may retain an attachment to a perspective of transformation that they are not presently acting on; they may find themselves losing sight of it from time to time. The reception fades in and out, like a city FM station in the countryside. When they see or hear of people's lives that seem to have been touched by these sources of transformation, they can be strongly moved "(Taylor, 2007: 521). Taylor's remedial suggestion is to encourage people to reconnect with the converts and examples of earlier times. He argues that "the Christian faith can be lived better and more fully by links with other ages than our own, and so we read Augustine or about the lives of the Saints and so on" (Kuipers, 2008). We, the believers of today, need to identify and emulate those who have radiated with some sense of direct

Taylor's remedial suggestion is to encourage people to reconnect with the converts and examples of earlier times. He argues that "the Christian faith can be lived better and more fully by links with other ages than our own, and so we read Augustine or about the lives of the Saints and so on". We need to identify and emulate those who have radiated with some sense of direct encounter with God's power or participated in God's love.

encounter with God's power or participated in God's love. "We need to increase our range of examples of what this more direct contact (with God) might involve" (Taylor, 2007: 729). He points out the examples of the itineraries of saints, prophets, and charismatic leaders such as St. Francis, St. Teresa, John Wesley, Jonathan Edwards, Bede Griffiths, and Vaclav Havel.

Karl Rahner: The Shape of the Church to Come

Karl Rahner viewed the Council of Vatican II as a “process of the collective finding of the truth” (*kollektive Wahrheitsfindung*) (Rahner, 1984: 82-88). I would say that the above quoted phrase of Rahner is the crux of his understanding and vision of the church post-Second Vatican Council. The greatest contribution to Rahner’s influence on the council was in ecclesiology. He was a prominent member of the theological commission that worked on the draft of *De Ecclesia*. He advocated for the reintroduction of the permanent diaconate, the integration of Mariology and Ecclesiology, the collegial relationship between the Pope and the Synod of Bishops, the theological significance of local churches, and the relationship between the church and the world today at the Council. The ideas which he put forward and the commissions which he was involved in are the proofs of his direct and indirect contributions towards the preparation of *Lumen Gentium*, *Dei Verbum*, *Gaudium et Spes*, and *Perfectae Caritatis*.

Karl Rahner engaged himself in the discussions which started at the 1971 meeting of the German Synod of Bishops through his book “The Shape of the Church to Come”. Rahner questioned the very basic concept of the synod itself. He invoked the attention of the synod of bishops to have a collective consensus on the very concept of a synod, the way it establishes its aims and the execution of its activities. He prompted them to have a proper strategy for building up the church of the future (Rahner, 1983: 10-16). For him, today’s church cannot simply move along with the predicaments of past glory and dogmatic imperatives. Rather, it needs to have a proper sense of the time and smell of the state. Directives and guidelines for the church and the world should be formulated in the light of the comprehensive understanding of history, dogmatic revelations, and the constant changes of society.

In the process of designing the future church, Rahner addressed the existing institutional relationship between the church of today and that of the past generations. A comprehensive and unbiased understanding of history and a prophetic awareness of the gospel are inevitable in the setting of a proper futuristic vision of the church. A well-built blend of these two will help the church to keep an unprejudiced openness towards the fast-changing world, analyse and understand it better, and accommodate it with unending compassion. Rahner says that the church has to acquire an “ultimately charismatically inspired, creative imagination” (Rahner, 1983: 47) to envision the church of the future. It is a challenge as well as a blessing for the church. It opens up unlimited choices for creativity and a vast horizon for adaptation.

For Rahner, today’s church cannot simply move along with the predicaments of past glory and dogmatic imperatives. Rather, it needs to have a proper sense of the time and smell of the state. Directives and guidelines for the church and the world should be formulated in the light of the comprehensive understanding of history, dogmatic revelations, and the constant changes of society.

For Rahner, our time is a transitional age from a church that is homogenously Christian to a church made up of “those who have struggled against their environment in order to reach a personally clear and explicitly responsible decision of faith” (Rahner, 1983: 24). Rahner locates the church in a place where public consciousness is made up of empirical sciences and experimental methods. He is not so pessimistic to claim that the modern world will completely exclude references to God from their belongings. Still, he predicts a chance of God being doubted and ignored more than ever before. God and faith may become a matter of personal preference rather than an innate and absolute truth imprinted in

everyone. People will follow the virtue of “a personal decision in every case” (Rahner, 1983: 23). Their social, political, and economic environments will have subtle involvement in the making of this decision.

Rahner warns Christians by reminding them of the possibility of being “a little flock” (Rahner, 1983: 29) in the world. He proceeds to say that this little flock should commit themselves with a living faith in Christ to take part in the redemption of the world. He sees this flock solely and completely relying on the grace of God. Unlike Taylor, Rahner makes a clear distinction between the “little flock” and sects. For Rahner, when a sect is defined by the quantity of its members, a “little flock” is defined by the mentality of the members. He

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writes, “The church, in its present minority situation, where it is no longer supported by the secular powers of society, can only be the church—and can only continually become the church—by deliberately being the church from below” (Rahner, 1981: 178-179). They have to dedicate themselves to social action, especially for the upliftment of the poor and marginalized. They need to be open and mature enough to be accommodative ecumenically. The Church should engage in its prophetic function not by being a judge but by being a model of its hospitality to all, irrespective of all boundaries and barriers.

Conclusion

Taylor and Rahner engaged in a mode of operation to bridge the gap between secular and sacred. They affirm the possible permeability of the boundary between sacred and secular. They are not diluting the Christian message or relativizing the truth. Rather, they try to clean the steins of exclusive humanism of the modern secular world and the absolute authority of religions to sort out a better meeting point of both. The Church cannot have an existence without addressing the messiness and problems of the world. It cannot separate itself from the rest of the world, and thus from its history. The history of the church is undoubtedly connected to the history of the world. It is in this world that the church has to proclaim the salvation of God. The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 1)

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Our Christian life is experienced also in its hiddenness. “Jesus says, kingdom of God is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, until it was all leavened” (Lk 13:20-21).

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Pope Francis on Easter

“At Easter, God finally reveals His glory: He takes away the last veil and astonishes us as never before. We discover, in fact, that God’s glory is all love: pure love, mad and unthinkable, beyond every limit and measure... True glory is the glory of love, because it is the only one that gives life to the world. Certainly this glory is the opposite of worldly glory, which comes when one is admired, praised, acclaimed. The glory of God, on the other hand, is paradoxical: no applause, no audience. At the center there is not the ego, but the other.”

“Why do you think that everything is hopeless, that no one can take away your own tombstones? Why do you give in to resignation and failure? Easter is the feast of tombstones taken away, rocks rolled aside. God takes away even the hardest stones against which our hopes and expectations crash: death, sin, fear, worldliness.”

“This is what Easter is: it is the exodus, the passage of human beings from slavery to sin and evil to the freedom of love and goodness. Because God is life, life alone, and we are his glory: the living man.”

“Easter is the event that brought radical news for every human being, for history and for the world: the triumph of life over death; it is the feast of reawakening and of rebirth. Let us allow our lives to be conquered and transformed by the Resurrection!”

“To celebrate Easter is to believe once more that God constantly breaks into our personal histories, challenging our “conventions”, those fixed ways of thinking and acting that end up paralyzing us. To celebrate Easter is to allow Jesus to triumph over the craven fear that so often assails us and tries to bury every kind of hope.”