
SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP IN HARD TIMES: KARL RAHNER AND ALFRED DELP

艰难时期的精神领导： 卡尔·拉纳和阿尔弗雷德·德尔佩

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ABSTRACT

Steeped in the Ignatian spirituality of seeking God in all things the two Jesuits have become inspiring figures of Christian life in a secular world. The paper explores how Karl Rahner, one of the greatest theologians of the 20th century, and Alfred Delp, a Christian martyr in Nazi Germany, drew their intellectual strength and social commitment from a practice of meditation and prayer that gave firm direction to their lives in adverse environments.



INTRODUCTION: WHY DELP AND RAHNER?

Christian spirituality is not based on an abstract theological concept or doctrine, but on the personal testimony of individuals. Despite rather different ways of life, Delp and Rahner share a deep faith in the salvific power of God even in the darkest days of 20th century history. They have inspired countless people in their search for authentic Christian spirituality.

Delp and Rahner were both Jesuits and knew each other personally. Both based their Christian existence as theologians and priests on a personal experience of God in the spirit of the Ignatian *Spiritual Exercises*. This experience was put to the test in the course of their lives from two directions: the critical inquiries of reason and the decidedly atheistic ideology of the Nazis and their totalitarian state. Delp led this struggle to death row and martyrdom. Rahner devoted all his theological strength to finding an answer to the question of how - in view of the catastrophes of the 20th century and the incomprehensibility and remoteness of God - one can experience Him and speak meaningfully of this experience.

Finally, Delp and Rahner share a deep mystical spirituality that is the centre of their lives. This means neither withdrawal from the world nor self-sufficient certainty of faith. Rather, it implies surrendering to the *deus semper maior*, the ever-greater God and His unfathomable guidance (Schaller, 2012, p. 345). At the same time, it provides the basis for an active service for the renewal of Church

and society and for the sustainability of faith in secular times.

WHO WERE THEY? A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Delp and Rahner were almost the same age and came from similar milieus. Rahner was born on March 5, 1904 in Freiburg and died shortly after his 80th birthday on March 30, 1984 in Innsbruck. He became one of the most important theologians of the 20th century, whose influence is recognisable in many documents of the Second Vatican Council and whose work is now available in 32 volumes of more than 4000 publications.

Delp was born on September 15, 1907 in Mannheim and executed on February 2, 1945 in Berlin-Plötzensee; he was only 37 years old.

Both were aware of the challenges to the Christian faith in modern times and sought to meet them through an in-depth analysis of their ideological foundations. For this purpose they engaged in the study of philosophy, and particularly in the philosophy of Martin Heidegger. For his doctoral studies Rahner went to Freiburg to study with Heidegger and to attend his seminars.

Delp read Heidegger intensively from 1928 on and published his critical reflections in 1935 in a book ominously titled *Tragic Existence*. It was not only the first book by a Catholic author about Heidegger, but also seemed to foreshadow his own “tragic existence.” From 1939 Delp was a theological writer and editor of the Jesuit monthly *Stimmen der Zeit* in Munich. When the Nazis banned the journal in 1941 and confiscated the house, Delp moved to a parish in a Munich suburb where he served his flock as pastor with great dedication and assisted with resourcefulness and courage all those affected by wartime destruction. He helped to dig out people buried under the rubble of their houses and helped Jewish families fleeing from their persecutors.

Immediately after his morning Eucharist on July 28, 1944 Delp was arrested. He was accused of being one of Count Stauffenberg’s co-conspirators, who had tried to assassinate

Hitler on July 20, 1944. Although Delp knew Stauffenberg personally, he had no part in the conspiracy, and the police could not prove otherwise. Yet he was accused of collaborating in the so-called *Kreisauer Kreis* (*Kreisau Circle*). This was a resistance group led by Helmuth James Graf von Moltke that met at his estate Kreisau to discuss the reorganization of Germany after the impending catastrophic end of the war and the Nazi regime. Delp had been involved in these conspiratorial consultations since mid-1942 and had been given the task of drawing up Germany’s new social order from a Christian perspective. To this end, he developed a new vision of social justice based on a Christian-inspired humanism (Delp, 1984, p. 310). Its purpose was to secure the foundations of law and order, which had to be inviolable by state power. Since the Nazis had destroyed such foundations, the first step was to reawaken a sense of law and justice before principles of a “genuine social order” could be established (Bleistein, 1989, pp. 271-2).

His reflections on the reorganization of Germany in the Christian spirit set Delp and the other members of the *Kreisau Circle* in sharp contrast to the Nazi ideology of the absolute state. And this was clearly noted during the trial by the presiding judge, when he yelled at Moltke: “Only in one aspect Christianity and we [Nazis] are equals: we demand the whole person!” (Delp, 1962, p. 85).¹ On January 11, 1945 Delp and Moltke were sentenced to death for high treason.

Compared to Delp, Rahner was granted a relatively quiet scholarly life, which, however, was shaken all the more inwardly by the catastrophes of the 20th century that directed the focus of his theology and spirituality to the question of the silent God. While Delp’s spirituality gained its clearest expression in his seven-month imprisonment on death row, Rahner could develop his theology over a long life and reflect on the theological implications of the spiritual experiences of Delp and other witnesses of faith in the 20th century (Rahner, 1982a, pp. 277-293; Rahner, 1982b).

Both Rahner and Delp were deeply influenced by the *Spiritual Exercises* of the

¹ Unless stated otherwise, all direct quotations are my translations from the original German texts.

founding father of their order, Ignatius of Loyola, whose spirituality originates from the experience of God in his life generating a profound passion for the incomprehensible God (Lehmann & Raffelt, 2014). Delp's letters, meditations and reflections, which he literally wrote down "with his hands tied" and "in the face of death" bear witness to this spirituality. It has also been preserved in the testimony of his fellow prisoners. Even in the prison's climate of fear and desperation, Delp's unshakable certainty of faith shines through and his ultimate surrender to the will of God, through which he endures imprisonment and torture, and finally accepts death with composure.

In Rahner's work one comes across an astonishing statement: "The devout Christian of the future will either be a 'mystic', one who has 'experienced' something, or he will cease to be anything at all"

LIVING IN THE SPIRIT OF IGNATIAN SPIRITUAL EXERCISES

1. Seeking and Finding God in all things

In a letter of June 1, 1551, Ignatius answered the question of how one should pray with the invitation "to practice seeking the presence of God our Lord in all things, e.g. in speaking, walking, seeing, tasting, hearing, thinking, in all actions; after all, God's majesty is in all things, by his presence, by his work, and by his nature" (Ignatius, 1956, p. 206). With this maxim, which is ultimately based on the theology of creation, Ignatius does not exclude any part of reality where God could be sought and found (Sudbrack, 1996). Spiritual life is not exhausted in traditional forms of worship, nor restricted to certain religious practices.

Rahner explores the implications of this theology of creation for contemporary Christian

spiritual life and develops the framework for transcendental theology. For him God's presence can be discovered even in the inconspicuous things of everyday life that are like "drops of water in which the whole sky is reflected; like signs that point beyond themselves" (Rahner, 2006, p. 476). Similarly, in his *Reflections on the Experience of Grace* Rahner points to a wide range of dispositions and activities in everyday life, which may reveal themselves as occasions for the encounter with God. They include for example keeping quiet when unfairly treated, forgiving without being acknowledged, sacrificing something without receiving thanks, acting purely on conscience, and loving God, when it seems "to be calling out into emptiness and our cry to fall on deaf ears" (Rahner, 1982a, p. 87).

Much more dramatic, but in the same spirit Delp jotted down on a piece of paper in Berlin-Tegel prison on November 17, 1944:

There is one thing which has never been clearer to me: The world is full of God. From all the pores of things this is pouring towards us, as it were. But we are often blind. We get stuck in the beautiful hours and in the bad hours. We do not experience them up to the point where they flow out of God (Delp, 1962, p. 51).

Delp and Rahner thus point to the centre of Ignatian spirituality, which lies in the authentic experience of God that enables the individual to bear and endure the ups and downs of life.

2. Authentic experience of God

In his fictitious speech of Ignatius of Loyola to a Jesuit of today, Rahner lets him at the very beginning emphasise the decisive aspect of his spirituality: In my illness in Loyola and in my time as a hermit in Manresa "I met God" (Rahner, 2008, p. 300). The biographical reference to illness and withdrawal from society makes clear that such experience is possible everywhere, not least in the adversities of life, because God can be found in all things. But even in such an experience God remains unfathomable and mysterious. Ignatius continues: "I say only: I have experienced God, the

nameless and unfathomable, silent and yet near (...) I have experienced God beyond all figurative imagination.” And yet it is true: “I have met God; I have experienced him myself,” and since then “I have experienced in a growing measure and ever more purely God in his impenetrable incomprehensibility” (Rahner, 2008, pp. 300-301). Rahner’s entire theology is the attempt to make sense of such experience by interpreting it in terms of the historical self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ while at the same time venerating in silence the mystery of the incomprehensible God.

‘experienced’ something, or he will cease to be anything at all” (Rahner, 1977, p. 15). For Rahner faith is and must be grounded in an existential experience. Mysticism as “the experimental contact with grace in infused contemplation” (Rahner, 1982a, p. 279) is the way in which God is experienced in daily life. But such an experience of God is radically unique and absolute. On the one hand, it can establish a certainty of faith that can be so unshakable that - as Ignatius writes in his *Pilgrim’s Account* - he would not waver in his faith “even if there were no Holy Scriptures”

“Now others have you, they torture you and frighten you and chase you from one anxiety to another. Yet this is the freedom that sings: ... no death can kill us. That is then the life that reaches out to the boundless expanse.” (Alfred Delp, S.J.)

Delp’s texts from death row give testimony to the same experience of the near and yet infinitely distant God with whom he struggles in his despair and to whose will he nevertheless surrenders: “There are hours in which only one thing remains to be done: to gather all the woe and the need into a cry of supplication, into a cry for mercy and help. And to call up to him or to cry or to weep and to lament and to whimper to the God of salvation” (Delp, 1962, p. 37). Delp is convinced that the “hour of the birth of freedom,” in which a person surrenders completely to God, is “the hour of the encounter with God.”

Whether God forces a man out of himself through overwhelming need and suffering, whether he lures him out of himself through the images of beauty and truth, whether he torments him out of himself through the infinite longing, through hunger and thirst for justice, that is actually indifferent. If man is only called and if he only accepts to be called. (Delp, 1962, p. 78)

3. Ignatian Mysticism of World Piety

In Rahner’s work one comes across an astonishing statement: “The devout Christian of the future will either be a ‘mystic’, one who has

(Rahner, 2008, p. 300). On the other hand, the encounter with God transcends any inner-worldly experience and reaches out to the ever-greater God. It pulls away the ground on which we normally stand, all certainty on which we usually rely, since whatever we understand, it is not God (St. Augustine). As long as we have not experienced “the bottomless depth of our existence,” we are not yet ready for the encounter with God.

“When we have let ourselves go and no longer belong to ourselves, when we have denied ourselves and no longer have the disposing of ourselves, when everything has moved away from us as if into an infinite distance, then we begin to live in the world of God himself, the world of the God of grace and of eternal life” (Rahner, 1982a, p. 89). As Rahner has emphasised time and again, God is “the abyss” whose incomprehensibility grows and does not diminish the nearer he comes to us in his love. In this encounter everything “tangible and assignable” has sunk and a “seemingly uncanny, bottomless depth of our existence” has become apparent, which can nevertheless be the “bottomless depth of God communicating himself to us, even if everything around us takes on the taste of death and destruction” (Ibid.).

This is the concept of mysticism

that Rahner shares with Delp. Rahner's characterization of man's precarious mode of existence "on the border between God and the world, time and eternity" (Rahner, 1982a, p. 88) has its counterpart in Delp's recurring images of rope and cliff, on which he sees himself placed in prison. On November 30, 1944, Delp noted: "There are also good hours of abundance and consolation. But on the whole we are on a tightrope and have to walk over an abyss" (Delp, 1962, p. 53). "The way to my cliff up here: how many hours of weakness and need did it take. Hours of powerlessness and doubt and of not knowing a way out." And Delp overcomes his doubts with the confession: "I have surrendered myself to the Lord God" (Delp, 1962, p. 104).

4. Existential Christianity

Ignatian spirituality originates from and is most authentically represented in the so-called *Spiritual Exercises*, i.e. instructions through prayer and meditation in preparation for the encounter with God.

Rahner read the small booklet of the *Spiritual Exercises* not only as one of "the most important fundamentals of contemporary western Christianity," (Rahner, 2008, p. 236) but also as a specifically modern document, since it places the individual subject in its freedom at the center of attention and thus contributes at least indirectly to the development of modern life and thought (Rahner, 2008, p. 217). He even claims that "the New Age is an age which Christianity itself has ushered in, in order to realize itself by way of self-reflection" (Rahner, 1977, 39).

Delp had already been aware since his first publications that history is formed by the actions and decisions of individuals. For him it is a continuous struggle and "an agonising event" from which nobody can escape (Delp, 1985, p. 417). Everyone has to assume the responsibility historically assigned to him/her in a free decision of conscience. And this applies all the more to situations of war, persecution, and destruction when man as "image and parable, thought, will, and love of the Lord God" is no longer sacred but has become dispensable at the whims of those

in power. "Woe be to the one by whom a man was annihilated, by whom an image of God was desecrated, even if it was in the last stages and even if it was only a faint image of humanity!" (Delp, 1983, p. 292). In language taken from the Old Testament prophets, Delp demands human rights for all and at the same time resolutely rejects the Nazi program of euthanasia.

When during the trial the question was raised about the motives for his collaboration in the *Kreisau Circle*, he replied: "I can preach as much as I want and treat people skillfully or clumsily and edify them as long as I want. As long as people have to live without dignity and inhumanely, the average will succumb to circumstances and neither pray nor think. Required is the thorough change of the conditions of life." To this the presiding judge snapped: "Are you saying that the state should be changed?" And Delp replied calmly and composed: "Yes, that's what I'm saying" (Bleistein, 1989, p. 378). With these words his death sentence was sealed.

5. Indifference

In the Rules at the beginning of the *Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius demands equanimity towards all created things, where this is granted to our deliberative choice and not forbidden on moral grounds. One should therefore desire "health no more than sickness, wealth no more than poverty, honor no more than dishonor, long life no more than a short one, and accordingly in all other things, yearning and choosing only that which promotes us more towards the goal for which we are created" (Ignatius, 1965, no. 23).

Accordingly, Rahner sees the spirit of Ignatian spirituality not in some particular practice or conception, but in something formal: a final attitude of all thoughts and actions. This attitude is one of indifference, "the calm readiness for every command of God." In view of the ever-greater God, it enables the individual to detach from all that is particular and to follow God wherever he may lead. Out of such an attitude of indifference "springs the will to be at hand like a servant always ready for new assignments." "Moved by such a spirit, even the passionate love

of the Cross and of sharing in the ignominy of the death of Christ is still ruled by indifference: the Cross, yes, if it should please his divine Majesty to call to such a death in life” (Rahner, 1982a, pp. 290-291).

What Rahner develops theologically, but also from his own spiritual experience, Delp has suffered in prison and proven in practice. In his meditation on the feast of Epiphany in 1945, Delp wrote: “The general fate, my personal situation, the message of the feast: everything collects into one: man, leave yourself to go to your God and you will have yourself again” (Delp, 1962, p. 78). With this he alludes to the *Suscipe*, the prayer Ignatius included in his *Spiritual Exercises*. This prayer and Thomas Aquinas’ famous *Adoration (Adoro te devote, latens Deitas)* are for Delp “primeval words of life,” in whose spirit of indifference he can entrust himself to God even in death and desperation. He notes: “Now others have you, they torture you and frighten you and chase you from one anxiety to another. Yet this is the freedom that sings: ... no death can kill us. That is then the life that reaches out to the boundless expanse: *Adoro* and *Suscipe*: you primeval words of life, you straight and steep paths to God, you gateways to the abundance, you paths of man to himself” (Delp, 1962, p. 78). In a letter to his Munich friends dated January 11, 1945, Delp returns to this meditation after the prosecutor had called for the death sentence: “*Adoro* and *Suscipe* are the last words of the epiphany contemplation that I wrote. Let us leave it at that. Don’t be sad (...). Now I have to let go” (Ibid.).

On February 2, 1945, Delp was hanged in Berlin-Plötzensee. Three days later his judge was killed in a hail of bombs, and soon after the Nazi rule of terror collapsed.



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