ABSTRACT
THE MYSTICAL AND POLITICAL BODY: CHRISTIAN IDENTITY IN THE THEOLOGY OF KARL RAHNER

Erin Kidd, B.A., M.T.S.
Marquette University

Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner (1904-1984) is well known for initiating the turn to the subject in Catholic theology. The heart of Rahner’s theological reflection is the experience of God as encouraged by Ignatius of Loyola’s Spiritual Exercises. In questioning how the subject experiences God, Rahner develops a theological anthropology that attempts to elucidate the original unity of spirit and matter. As he argues, the human being is “spirit-in-world”—the one who actualizes her transcendence in space and over time. While Rahner’s readers have been quick to draw out the implications of the subject as spirit, they have been less attentive to exactly how this spirit is in-world.

I argue that philosopher feminist philosopher Shannon Sullivan’s account of the self as transactional can illuminate Rahner’s understanding of the subject as spirit-in-world. Her theory provides a way of speaking about a freedom that is no less embodied or socially embedded, and can therefore illuminate how the freedom to effect a fundamental option for God is social and historical. More broadly, appropriating Sullivan’s work into a Christian theology of the body provides a framework for talking about the intersection of embodiment and Christian identity. In turn, Rahner’s theology allows us to evaluate forms of identity construction according to the norms of love of God, neighbor, and self.

When we understand that human beings are precisely those spirits that accomplish themselves in and through matter, what follows is an understanding of the human body as simultaneously the site of the experience of God and political transformation. This understanding of the human person ultimately calls forth a way of life—one that demands solidarity with those who suffer, vigilance over our habits of bodying, openness to mystery, and hope in the world to come.