Crossing: The INPR Journal
Vol. 1 (2020): 218-222
DOI: [10.21428/8766eb43.f5513261](https://doi.org/10.21428/8766eb43.f5513261)

A response to Peter Fritz's, *Freedom Made Manifest: Rahner's
Fundamental Option and Theological Aesthetics*

Jonathan M. Ciraulo
Saint Meinrad Seminary and School of Theology
Saint Meinrad, Indiana
jciraulo@saintmeinrad.edu

Peter Fritz's second volume in his projected trilogy on Karl Rahner does exactly what the first volume did: it demonstrates that Rahner, reduced to a desiccated system with its attendant vocabulary and commitments (e.g., the so-called anthropological turn, *Vorgriff*, fundamental option, transcendental existential, anonymous Christian) is a rather anemic Rahner – or rather, no Rahner at all. This he does with clear prose, an elegant structure, and an expansive understanding of how the various genres of Rahner's corpus (transcendental philosophy, piety, dogmatics) fit together cohesively. What Fritz destroys rather mercilessly, and quite rightly, is the picture of Rahner as Kant playing a twentieth-century Catholic priest. This he does in the first volume, *Karl Rahner's Theological Aesthetics* (CUA, 2014), in which he makes it evident that Rahner's engagement with Heidegger (and concomitantly his distance from Kant on the transcendental ego) had far more staying power than simply a memory of his halcyon days as a student in Freiburg, and can be detected particularly in his most transcendental of texts, *Geist in Welt*, as well as in much later, and specifically dogmatic, texts.

In this subsequent volume, *Freedom Made Manifest* (FMM), Fritz sets his sights on another prevalent reading of Rahner: that for all of his occasional forays into sacramental theology and the Church, which sit rather uneasily with his main constructive work, Rahner is above all oblivious to the fact that concrete historical life could render something other than a happy, facile "yes" to God, given that our

anonymous (and private) identities move us along towards that happy day whether we like it or not. Fritz makes it clear that the rather generic conception of a "fundamental option" is something that Rahner himself intended to flesh out in an ecclesologically robust way, with the concrete specificity of the sacramental practice of the Catholic Church. This becomes most clear when Rahner's prodigious writings on the sacrament of penance are read as the fundamental option in action: a "yes" or "no" to God within the communal context of a suffering and repentant Church.

After noting that I consider the text to have successfully accomplished its stated goals, I will here make three interrelated inquiries about the text: first, concerning Fritz's denunciation of the category of the dramatic, second, the question about the Christological density of the fundamental option, and third, the relationship between concupiscence and finitude.

Fritz's projected trilogy has a conspicuous, if largely subterranean, dialogue with Balthasar in mind, far beyond those moments in which the Swiss theologian becomes a thematic topic himself. This is most evident in the fact that Fritz's trilogy follows the lead of Balthasar's: first, the question of aesthetics (*The Glory of the Lord*); second, the tension inherent in the exercise of human freedom (and the *analogia libertatis* between divine and human freedom is the dominant question throughout the *Theo-Drama*); and third, by way of anticipation, the content or the "truth" of revelation (and Fritz tacitly uses the title of the first volume of the *Theo-Logic* to describe his next volume: *Wahrheit der Welt* [FMM, 244]). I read this not as an attempt to make Rahner into an anonymous Balthasarian, but more simply to demonstrate that, all along, the theologically rich, historically attuned, and poetically inclined are attributes of not only one, but both of these theological giants. Fritz is decidedly committed to Rahner, though never ungenerous towards Balthasar.

Given the above, which I consider too obvious to be merely circumstantial, it is a curiosity that at the moment in which the Rahner-Balthasar comparison becomes most acute, Fritz chooses to distance Rahner from the notion of the dramatic, whereas he is eager to recover a Rahnerian commitment to the aesthetic. "For Rahner, freedom is not primarily a matter of drama, certainly not high drama fit for a grand stage," and the ultimate result of this volume "is an aesthetic of fragility, not of dramatic heroism" (FMM, 237–38, see also 214). Whether or not Fritz is suggesting that Balthasar's drama precludes attention to human frailty, or that he prefers heroic sanctity over the more mundane variety, it is clear that Fritz wants to locate holiness (or at least its potential) in the mundane, often tragic, struggle for a free assent to God's will.

The importance of retaining the dramatic is highlighted by Fritz's opening question: "How can the insignificant *announce* the eternal?" (FMM, 1, emphasis

added). Quite easily, in fact. If understood as a mere sign, a circle can “announce” the eternal. But the entire weight of Fritz’s argument, especially his elucidation of Rahner’s “Theology of the Symbol” and his emphasis on the Schellingian roots of Rahner’s notion of the person’s *exstasis* from nature, points to the fact that by “announce” he does not mean “signify,” but more precisely “enact.” The astonishing fact is not the finite signifying the infinite (the basis for all analogical predication), but the finite bearing the infinite, the eternal enacting itself finitely through finite decisions that reach out towards the infinite.

Just as Fritz acknowledges that a theological aesthetics is not held captive by artistic good taste or philosophical presuppositions about beauty (*FMM*, 11), so likewise Christian conceptions of what constitutes significant drama cannot submit to what aesthetes consider “fit for a grand stage.” Indeed, the major contention of Fritz’s book is that Rahner’s attention to exposed, fragile human freedom is *the* drama underlying all human life as it is exposed both to the world at large (often resulting in trauma) and to God. But the key here is that human freedom is always undergirded by the freedom of God, by “God’s free, eternal decision to create, to save, and to self-communicate as love” (*FMM*, 239). And in Fritz’s interpretation, the Jesuit Rahner does not view this as a bland, generic call, but as a personal encounter between the freedom of God and finite human freedom (*FMM*, 146–50). This text then provides us with a highly dramatic Rahner, one attentive to the vicissitudes and contingencies of human life, which encounters a God who wills in the particular and demands responses in kind. Whether this drama appears remarkable or mundane is utterly irrelevant to the one who has chosen the path of Ignatian *indiferencia*.

The second and related inquiry concerns the “Christoform” or “Christological” rendering of the fundamental option. While I consider the ecclesiological and sacramental renderings of Rahner to be definitive and largely unassailable, Fritz insists that Rahner’s theology of freedom is a “Christological idea” (*FMM*, 10), a claim he repeats throughout the text. With a few minor exceptions (to which I will return shortly), what Fritz seems to mean by this is that it is a “Christian” conception of freedom, meaning that it is not a vague decision between the individual ego and “God,” but a decision that the Christian makes within an ecclesial context regarding whether one will serve Christ or Lucifer (the Two Standards). It is Christological with regard to its object, but with very few exceptions, not with regard to the subject. That is to say, *Christ’s* freedom is not the main focus of the text, which would have necessitated a discussion of Christ’s unconfused and undivided wills (Constantinople III), how his finite freedom expressed in and through his created human nature and will are an exemplum of all human freedom and willing.

Third inquiry: even for Rahner's reinterpretation of concupiscence as not necessarily sinful, and rather as the *conditio sine qua non* of our tension between nature and person and thus the finitude of our decisions, Rahner still affirms that Jesus and Mary did *not* have concupiscence, even as understood in this more generous manner. Further, as he says in the essay "The Theology of Power," the concupiscence that makes our freedom determined and limited is eventually to be left behind:

[Concupiscence] is gradually to be overcome, it is something to be fought against by means of spirit, love and grace. Though man's task is endless, though he fails at it again and again till victory is bestowed on him as grace in the coming of death and resurrection, man is a being who is to integrate his whole self more and more, including his material element, into the God-ward decision of his freedom under grace.¹

Given the role that Fritz affords to concupiscence as grounding humanity in historicity and finitude, its absence leads to the inevitable question regarding the enduring status of the finite. Fritz would obviously resist the notion of a penultimate finitude, and there are seeds of a more stable, enduring ground scattered throughout the text: the non-concupiscent, yet finite, human heart of Jesus. We will return to this in a moment. But apart from a citation of Rahner noting that Christ was indeed free from concupiscence (*FMM*, 231), it remains unclear just how dependent our own finitude is on our (temporary) concupiscent condition, as well as how Christ relates to our concupiscence (Christ is "overwhelmed by a concupiscent remainder," he "receives the full force of concupiscence," [*FMM*, 233–34]).

Fritz places great weight on concupiscence as rendering human freedom possible as a finite, contingent, and fraught affair. Nevertheless, it seems that even for all of Rahner's highly suggestive re-reading of concupiscence, the effect is actually the opposite of what Fritz intended: were it *not* for Original Sin, finitude and contingency would not be constitutive of the human person, and thus the prelapsarian and eschatologically redeemed human would indeed be the Kantian transcendental ego that Fritz fought so hard to critique. "Concupiscence is a condition of finitude" (*FMM*, 69), "concupiscent life does not have the *last word*" (*FMM*, 238). Perhaps it is phenomenologically insignificant how one reads the etiology of finitude, given that it is patently our current constitution, but theologically there are enormous consequences, especially as regards eschatology.

¹ Karl Rahner, "The Theology of Power," in *Theological Investigations 4: More Recent Writings*, trans. Kevin Smyth (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1966), 394.

Is finitude to be endured historically but abolished eschatologically (and Rahner's notion of the pan-cosmic flesh will need be interpreted here), or is finitude a positive, enduring feature of creaturely difference from God? Is Christ's finitude, without concupiscence, not the better model for creaturely freedom?

Rahner does, of course, decouple concupiscence and finitude, and not only does he insist on the finitude of the humanity of (the non-concupiscent) Christ on earth, but the enduring relevance of Christ's humanity in the eschaton, particularly in his essay "The Eternal Significance of the Humanity of Jesus for our Relationship with God." Balthasar, too, lauds Rahner for this essay.² Even if it is a muted note in the book, Fritz does highlight a genuinely Christological finitude. And though they are rather exceptional usages of "Christological," I read these moments in which Christological is understood most robustly as key to Fritz's text. While Rahner's devotion to and theological deployment of the Sacred Heart is noted throughout, usually it is as an example of the Christological object of Christian freedom. Yet, in a few highly suggestive pages (*FMM*, 229–35), Fritz turns to an analysis of freedom from *within* the Christological mystery: speaking of "Christ's exposed freedom," and "Christ whose heart is pierced" (*FMM*, 234), even to say of Christ in Gethsemane: "This is Rahner's model for human decision, even for the fundamental option—an existence grounded in a pierced heart, overwhelmed by a concupiscent remainder, suffering unto God, uttering a silent cry" (*FMM*, 233, emphasis in the original). Thus, while Fritz earlier highlights other instances of human suffering as an example of exposed freedom, such as his analysis of Rahner's "old age" essay (*FMM*, 186–89), other forms of depression and suffering should be read in the light of Christ's self-abandonment, and his experience of abandonment on the cross.

Here, despite whatever quibbles with vocabulary there may be, Fritz indicates that Rahner's conception of freedom is truly a dramatic one, and given that it is the Logos incarnate who utters that silent cry, perhaps it is even a theo-dramatic one. And though Rahner is allergic to Constantinople II (as noted by Fritz, *FMM*, 214), he still affirms that the Sacred Heart is the heart of the Son of God, the Logos. And this, again, is not to abolish the true differences between Rahner and Balthasar, but to note the true theological, specifically Christological, density of the former. Given the indications concerning the last installment of the trilogy (*FMM*, 244–45), we can hope that Fritz will capably elucidate how, for Rahner, Christ not only announces transcendent truths, but enacts them from within the interiority of the world.

² Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, Vol. 5: *The Last Act*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 384, n.36.