

# The Roman Magisterium in the Twentieth Century: New Perspectives from the Vatican Archives The Case of Karl Rahner and the Aspect of Contingency

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This issue of the *Journal of Modern and Contemporary Christianity* documents a workshop held at Villa Vigoni, the German-Italian Centre for European Dialogue, in October 2023. It was organised by Claus Arnold, Dominik Heringer and Giovanni Vian. The opening of the Vatican archives for the pontificate of Pius XII has also created new possibilities for research into the history of theology. The Franco-German-Italian workshop examined ongoing projects in this context and related them to earlier research on the history of the Magisterium and Roman censorship. Theologically, the pontificate of Pius XII was characterised by an interesting mixture of cautious tendencies towards openness and renewed repression. Against this background, the workshop offered an impressive panorama of current research on the Roman Magisterium under Pius XII, which unfolds in the contributions to this issue. These offer many doctrinal, source-critical, institutional and prosopographical points of contact.

It is not necessary to present the individual contributions here since this issue concludes with analytical contributions by Klaus Unterburger and Giovanni Vian. Instead, in this editorial I would like

to briefly address the *aspect of contingency* that even the actions of the Roman Magisterium cannot completely escape. This can be seen in the difficulties that Karl Rahner experienced with the Holy Office between 1953 and 1957. (A detailed account of this case will appear in the *Ephemerides Theologiae Lovanienses* in the autumn of 2024). Rahner's critics in the Holy Office were mainly the Jesuits Franz Hürth, Sebastiaan Tromp and Augustin Bea who were eager to redimension their 'extravagant' confrere, while the Jesuit General Jean Baptiste Jannsens tried to protect Rahner. All in all, Rahner got off lightly with a *monitum*, although he was directly targeted by Pius XII himself. The spectre of a dangerous 'new theology' in the German-speaking world, allegedly propagated jointly by Karl Adam, Romano Guardini and Karl Rahner, which was conjured up in the Holy Office, remained without an effective response from the religious authorities in the final phase of the pontificate. A closer look at the case reveals its more contingent elements:

Free trial subscriptions were available as early as 1955, when Werner G. Hoffmann, director of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (F.A.Z.), offered one to the papal Secretariat of State. He quoted foreign press reports that the paper, around which "Germany's elite" gathered, was one of the "world's leading newspapers". The Vatican was not averse to this offer, and the German curial official Bruno Wüstenberg drafted a friendly note of acceptance. The letter, however, was delayed by the nunciature in Bonn-Bad Godesberg, the official channel through which it was sent. Nuncio Aloysius Muench pointed out to his superiors in Rome that the offer was only a two-week trial subscription, which would have to be paid for afterwards. In addition, the nunciature already had two subscriptions on behalf of the Secretariat of State and was forwarding relevant news and copies. Faced with this embarrassment, Angelo dell'Acqua, the Secretariat of State's substitute, grimly remarked that the nuncio should just do what he wanted. Muench withheld the letter of acceptance.

In fact, the Roman Curia had been interested in the press landscape of the young Federal Republic of Germany for some time. The Secretariat of State had its own "Office for the Foreign Press" and had asked nuncio Muench to obtain relevant material as early as 1951. Surprisingly, the relatively unimportant *Frankfurter Neue Presse* (FNP) was mentioned by name. Nuncio Muench creatively carried out the Vatican's wish and reported to Giovanni Battista Montini, the future Pope Paul VI: instead of the FNP, which had only local significance, he preferred the F.A.Z., a neutral, rather liberal daily. According to Muench, it contained well-written articles and was closer to the famous old *Frankfurter Zeitung*.

The F.A.Z. subscription of the Godesberg nunciature was to have consequences for the history of theology. In October 1956 Nuncio Muench sent an article by the Innsbruck Jesuit Karl Rahner to Rome,

which was immediately presented to Pope Pius XII in person. The Pope decided to report the article to the Holy Office. What had happened? On the occasion of the Tübingen theologian Karl Adam's 80th birthday in 1956, Rahner had dedicated a three-column article to him in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* of 20 October 1956, with the bold title *Theology in the World*. In purely formal terms, this act pointed to the changed constellation in German-language Catholic theology, which had previously been characterised by a sharp front between university and Jesuit theology. It was precisely from Innsbruck that "modernist" young Catholic theologians in the German Empire had been attacked in the period before 1914. Rahner himself had expressed reservations about Adam's anti-intellectual concept of faith in a report for Cardinal Archbishop Innitzer in 1943. Now, however, he decided on a very specific reception of Adam: after a short curriculum vitae and a brief overview of his work, Rahner spent more than half of his article describing the upheaval in the theology of his time, from a

neo-Gothic Neo-Scholasticism to a theology that is scholastic but otherwise has no name of its own (as little as the style of the present tends to have).

Among the theologians who had prepared the change to this "new theology" – which, incidentally, had nothing to do with modernism and was not affected by Pius XII's encyclical *Humani generis* – Karl Adam was in the front row. This unspecific reception and use of Adam had at least as much to do with Rahner as with Adam. Rahner found Adam's individual positions less exemplary than his theological style, which in the pastoral interest went beyond textbook dogmatics. Since Adam has since fallen victim to a *damnatio memoriae* because of his affinities with National Socialism, this kind of reception was perhaps particularly appropriate in retrospect.

Pius XII, on the other hand, must have felt provoked not only by the talk of a 'new theology', since he had on several occasions condemned the *nouvelle théologie* in the French-speaking world and had only recently reiterated this condemnation in a speech. Pope Pacelli also had a personal "history" with Karl Adam: it was he who, as nuncio in Berlin in March 1926, had reported Adam's works, especially his communitarian *Das Wesen des Katholizismus* (The Spirit of Catholicism), directly to the Holy Office, thus initiating a long history of censorship for Adam. Pius XII was also aware of Adam's Nazi sympathies. And he had a long memory: as late as February 1955 he had personally complained to his private librarian Wilhelm Hentrich SJ that Adam had been overpraised in a review of the *Festschrift* for his 75th birthday in the Dominican journal *Angelicum*. Hentrich had to arrange for the editors to be reprimanded by the Holy Office.

Against this background, of which Rahner could hardly have been aware, it was the most embarrassing thing for a theologian already suspiciously eyed to honour Karl Adam of all people.

In fact, both Pius XII and the Holy Office had had Karl Rahner in their sights for several years. In a speech in 1954, the Pope had directly contradicted Rahner's ideas on the concelebration of Holy Mass by priests, and Rahner's ideas on the lay apostolate worried bishops throughout Europe. By honouring Karl Adam, of all people, Rahner had also raised the spectre of a 'new theology' in Germany, of which Karl Adam, Romano Guardini and Karl Rahner were regarded as the heads of the school by theologians in the Holy Office like Augustin Bea. An inhomogeneous group, but now Rahner himself had claimed Adam as his own.

The Holy Office now planned extensive measures to condemn the 'new theology' in Germany and to probe the orthodoxy of Karl Rahner's *opera omnia*. However, in the final phase of Pius XII's pontificate, almost everything came to nothing. Rahner had also protected himself: His catalogue of writings already numbered 378. The elderly Austrian prelate Alois Hudal, now notorious for his commitment to the 'rat line', was entrusted with the task of examining these writings. He failed miserably at this challenge, "analysing" Rahner's entire work in just two weeks and presenting it in two and a half typewritten pages. In fact, Hudal only summarised the censures and criticisms of Rahner's confreres Sebastiaan Tromp, Augustin Bea, Franz Hürth and others that were already extant in the Holy Office. This provided no basis for a condemnation of Rahner.

Rahner got off lightly, apart from an admonition for his teaching on concelebration. In Rome, however, people could not understand why the F.A.Z. article had been allowed to appear at all. Already in 1956 Rahner was subject to stricter pre-censorship within the Jesuit order, although he was not directly aware of this. In his explanation to the Jesuit General, Rahner's provincial, Gottfried Heinzl, revealed that he had completely misjudged the situation: There had been no written censorship because of the "small, harmless publication", which allegedly was only an appreciation and enumeration of the work of the Tübingen theologian Karl Adam on the occasion of his 80th birthday. Father Rahner had probably been asked to write this little article because of his great reputation in Germany. The title "Theology in the World", which probably suggested something quite different, did not come from Father Rahner, but was chosen by the newspaper editors, probably to create a "sensation". Together with his co-censor, Father Emerich Coreth, Heinzl was in favour of Father Rahner making this act of friendship towards Tübingen. As Heinzl rightly pointed out, there had been a certain tension in the air between Tübingen and Innsbruck for a long time, but this seemed to be easing more and more in recent times. A number of theologians from

Tübingen now came to Innsbruck every year for their ‘free semesters’, which had not been the case in the past. If in Innsbruck the number of students was of paramount importance, in Rome the same was true for theological newspaper articles. These were read with a particularly keen eye.

Of course, contingent factors are not the only determinants of the Roman Magisterium’s approach to theological innovation. The following contributions clearly show the institutional, prosopographical, doctrinal and other structural factors and constellations of this fascinating topic, which played a formative role in the pontificate of Pius XII – a pontificate, which was not lacking in other moving themes.

