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Source: *CrossCurrents*, Vol. 29, No. 2, PANIKKAR AT SANTA BARBARA: The Myth of Pluralism: The Tower of Babel — A Meditation on Non-Violence (SUMMER 1979), pp. 183-189, 192

Published by: Wiley

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24458014>

Accessed: 17-10-2017 09:46 UTC

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PANIKKAR'S APPROACH TO INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

For Raimundo Panikkar interreligious dialogue has been an unavoidable experience of life. Born as he was of a Hindu father and Spanish Catholic mother, and nourished on both the Vedas and the Bible, Panikkar lived a life of dialogue from the start. His writing has been focused on the problem of the relationship between religions — especially between Christianity and Hinduism. In addition to writing, he has kept the problem in existential focus by spending several months in India each year while living in Santa Barbara. It is fitting, therefore, that a symposium to honor Raimundo Panikkar should give attention to principles for inter-religious dialogue. The approach taken in this paper will be to state Panikkar's suggested principles for inter-religious dialogue, and then to offer constructive criticism.

Panikkar's approach to the principles of inter-religious dialogue is hard to capture in a systematic fashion. Although this issue is highlighted in each of his books, and in a *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* editorial (17), there is no one place where his approach to this question is comprehensively summarized. One of the obstacles to reducing Panikkar's thought to clear conceptual form is that his vision of inter-religious dialogue stretches beyond the rational and into the intuitive realm. Consequently, on the rational level there is inconsistency and paradox; yet if one empathizes with Panikkar and senses the depths of insight his words evoke, there is a constant unity embodied in all his writings. While Panikkar's approach has undoubtedly served the important personal function of providing an acceptable basis for the ongoing Christian-Hindu dialogue, which for him is a lifelong affair, and while his expression of that approach has been inspiring to many others, it must be carefully examined before being embraced by scholarship and the encounter of religions with one another. As Panikkar himself would agree, finding the correct approach to inter-religious dialogue is a matter of top priority for today's world.

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The following is an attempt at a concise summary of Panikkar's approach to inter-religious dialogue, presented under the three headings, "Presuppositions", "Principles" and "Practical Steps".

Presuppositions for Dialogue

1. *Dialogue between religions is today a religious and human imperative* (17, p. 407). Religions can no longer be practised in isolation. Today, with the increasing need for global understanding, "the religion of my brother becomes also for me a personal religious problem" (3, p. 3). This means that dialogue cannot be undertaken as a shallow study focusing on historical data and cultural manifestations of the religions, for this would be to ignore the inner faith — the true locus of the discussion (2, p. 1). It also means that all meaningful theologizing for the future must start from the fact of inter-religious dialogue as its necessary context.
2. *Intellectually no religion can boast that it has deciphered fully the mystery of man and God* (3, p. 4).
3. *Freedom of thought in the search for truth must be granted to all parties in the dialogue* (17, p. 408).
4. *Institutional religions are sociological structures within cultures and should not be confused with the deeper level — what Panikkar calls the 'essence' as opposed to the 'form' of religious experience* (2, p. 3). Each institutional and cultural structure of religion is a sociological unit, like the others, and must be judged on its own merits and demerits (17, p. 409).

Principles for Dialogue

1. *True dialogue requires intellectual openness without bias or prejudice* (3, p. 2). This requires that the participants in the dialogue intellectually allow one another the possibility of perceiving the ultimate nature of reality as being either unitary or pluralistic (given Presuppositions 2 and 3 above) (17, p. 408).
2. *Dialogue requires a profound loyalty to one's own religion*. Dialogue does not belong to the merely doctrinal or descriptive level, for it requires the full encounter of two 'religious experiences.' The encounter of true dialogue occurs only when the doctrines are considered merely as starting points for reaching the reality underlying them (3, pp. 2 and 4). When two believers of different faiths meet, it is a unique religious event — quite different from the efforts of two scholars searching only for certain common or distinctive features (as, for example, in the comparison of 'grace' in Christianity and Hinduism), and quite different from the encounter of two politicians or diplomats. The two believers meet with the motivation of showing a faithfulness to the divine (3, pp. 7–10). Panikkar puts the point concisely, "Religions meet where religions take their source" (3, p. 10). Religions meet and co-exist in dialogue in the heart (3, p. 11). And this deep dialogue of the heart can only be reached, says Panikkar, if the participants are profoundly loyal to their own religions.
3. *Christ is the common meeting ground, the point of encounter in all inter-*

religious dialogue (3, p. 5). Christ is the Lord one meets at the level of the heart when religion is stripped of its forms or outer coverings (2, p. 4). "Christ," here, is not meant to refer specifically to Jesus of Nazareth but to that *Logos*, Principle, or Being that the various religious traditions call by a variety of names (2, pp. 53–4). That Christ is the beginning and end of all religion.

For example, says Panikkar, "Christ is not only the ontological goal of Hinduism but also its true inspirer, and His grace is . . . pushing it towards its full disclosure" (3, p. x). "Christ is the only mediator, but Christ is not the monopoly of Christians and is, in fact, efficient and present in any authentic religion, regardless of its name and form (17, p. 409). Understood in this way, Panikkar maintains, "Christianity presents itself as the catholic religion, as the full and universal religion . . . [This fact] prevents us from considering it as *one* religion among others . . . Christianity is the fullness of religion and thus the real perfection of every religion . . ." (3, p. x). Therefore, says Panikkar, the principle on which Christianity enters into dialogue is ". . . (to show) the presence of 'Christian' truths within other religions, and the possibility of unveiling them so that the unveiled truth may be ready to receive the revealed fullness of Christ" (3, p. xi).

This principle of taking Christ as the criterion point of encounter for all inter-religious dialogue is clearly demonstrated in Panikkar's first book which states as its aim to show "that there is a living Presence of Christ in Hinduism" (3, p. ix). Although more cautiously stated, the same principle appears in his recent and most theological book, *The Trinity and the Religious Experience of Man*. After evoking the Christian image of the seed which falls into the ground and dies so that new life may sprout forth, Panikkar notes that, in an analogous way, Christian 'stripping' should be complete.

The faith of the enlightened Christian must strip itself of the 'christian religion' as it actually exists and free itself for a fecundation that will affect all religions both ancient and modern . . .

By collaborating towards the *universalisation* of christianity, towards the actualisation in fact of its catholicity, one is contributing to the development of all religions towards unity . . . If I take christianity as my point of departure, it is not out of partiality or sectarianism but because it is necessary to start somewhere, and I believe that christianity is especially called to 'suffer' this purifying transformation. (2, pp. 3–6)

Panikkar, of course, realizes that each religion will see itself as offering the criterion and fullness toward which all others must move to be approximated. He points out, for example, that from the Hindu perspective of the relative truth of all religions, the goal of the inter-religious dialogue is perceived in terms of Christianity becoming absorbed as another 'branch' of Hinduism (3, p. 2 and p. 14). And while he adopts the Christian

perspective out of loyalty to his own faith, there is more to it than that. Panikkar's principle that Christ is the criterion for all inter-religious encounter is founded on the epistemological claim that the Christian revelation contains the truth of reality to a degree which transcends all other religions. This is a claim which Panikkar seems to make not only as a believer, but also as a scholar of comparative religion. The nature of the claim is most fully revealed when Panikkar states that the eventual goal of all interfaith encounter is first dialogue, then understanding, and eventually the conversion of all religions to the essence of the Christian revelation, the Christ *logos*. But one must not mistakenly take Panikkar to be advocating an ecclesiastical missionary colonialism. For the unity in Christ that Panikkar advocates is one stripped of sectarian religious forms — it is a unity in the mystical Christ *logos* (2, pp. 3–4, 54; 3, p. xi, 6; 17, p. 409).

Practical Steps

In addition to the above principles and presuppositions, Panikkar's own considerable experience of inter-religious dialogue has made clear certain practical steps that are also required.

1. *No inter-religious dialogue can yield fruit unless it is preceded by an intra-religious dialogue within the partners themselves* (17, p. 408). The intra-religious dialogue implies a critical awareness that “my belief” — which for me may be ultimate and exhaustive — does not preclude an intellectual stepping back so as to critically examine my own faith in relation to the faith of others. It implies room for enrichment of my own faith through the dialogue experience (17).

2. *Inter-religious dialogue requires that the partners have some understanding of each other's cultural settings* (17). There must be equal preparation toward this end by both sides.

3. *There must be mutual trust and deep human honesty*. As Panikkar puts it, “All the cards must be on the table” (17).

With Panikkar's approach to inter-religious dialogue clearly before us, let us now enter the second half of our task, namely, constructive criticism.

A Critical Analysis of Panikkar's Approach

As one who is loyal to the Christian tradition and yet is also deeply drawn in scholarly study to the Hindu tradition, I find much that I agree with, and indeed personally share, in Panikkar's approach. Yet on one presupposition and one most important principle, I am in complete disagreement. Let us start by evaluating Panikkar's practical steps, then his presuppositions, and finally his principles for inter-religious dialogue.

All three of Panikkar's practical requirements ring true to the experience of this commentator in his own inter-religious dialogue encounters. There must be understanding of one another's cultural settings, or the common ground for communication will not exist. Mutual trust and deep

human honesty is also essential. But most important of all is the intellectual and emotional maturity which enables one to step back so as to critically examine one's own faith in relation to the faith of another. Panikkar suggests that this is only possible in inter-religious dialogue if it has been preceded by an *intra*-religious dialogue within the person's own faith. While I would agree that these two kinds of dialogue (and the openness to personal enrichment that results) are intimately connected, I am not sure that the order is exactly as Panikkar has stated it (i.e. *intra*-religious dialogue first, as a necessary prerequisite to *inter*-religious dialogue). It is my observation that in my own experience and the experience of many of my students the order appears to be the other way around. That is to say, it is often only after one has been introduced to religions and believers from traditions other than one's own that one is roused to a critical awareness within one's own faith. Indeed the process may well be "circular" or "spiral" in form rather than "linear". Sincere encounter with another tradition makes one more sensitive to the dialogue present between various camps within one's own tradition. And this increased awareness of one's own religious tradition gives one a broader basis for a deeper, more significant, inter-religious dialogue, and so on.¹ I think Panikkar implicitly recognizes this when he requires that all further *intra*-religious theologizing must take place within the context of (or at least with awareness of) *inter*-religious dialogue. Certainly this is exactly what he does in his recent book, *The Trinity and the Religious Experience of Man*.

All of Panikkar's presuppositions, except the last, seem to hit the mark squarely. His stress on the need for all religions to leave their isolationist approaches behind is gradually being adopted by the institutional churches.² His warning to those engaged in the academic study of world religions that any real understanding requires a going beyond the historical data and the rational doctrine to the level of intuition is also receiving recognition.³

The important observation that no religion can boast of having deciphered fully the mystery of man and God is simply a clear recognition of the limits of human knowledge — a recognition that most philosophers of religion both East and West would warmly endorse. Emphasis on freedom of thought as being granted to all parties in the dialogue is the academic counterpart to the religious requirement for the practice of humility.

It is Panikkar's presupposition that the "essence" and "form" of a religious tradition can be clearly separated that I find difficult to accept. This is an important point for Panikkar's larger thesis. It is on the assumption that a religion can somehow be stripped of its sociological and cultural forms until its essence stands revealed, that Panikkar's understanding of the goal or end of dialogue rests. If I understand him correctly, it is his view that inter-religious dialogue progresses by moving from discussion of the external forms of the traditions to a deeper awareness of essence

which lies at the heart of all religions, and which when reached is found to be universal — the Christ *logos*. Let me withhold for the moment discussion of the notion of a universal Christ *logos*. My critical concern here has to do with the very possibility of separating “form” from “essence” in the experience of a religious tradition. It is my view that a religion can only be experienced *in* and through the historical and cultural forms of its own tradition. To think that things such as religious traditions can be divided into two parts, the unessential outer coverings or historical accidentals and the inner essence that remains once the outer forms are stripped off, is to seriously misunderstand both the nature of reality and the limits of human epistemology. While Panikkar’s approach here can probably be made to fit with the Advaita Vedānta conceptions of *saguna* and *nirguna* knowledge of Brahman, it is hardly acceptable to many other schools of Hinduism, to say nothing of its basic incompatibility with both Buddhism and Christianity. To take it as a presupposition for inter-religious dialogue seems, therefore, to be quite unacceptable.

With regard to the principles for dialogue elucidated by Panikkar, the first two seem exactly correct. Dialogue, whether it be between religious believers, or at the level of academic discourse in the study of religions, requires that the participants aim at unbiased intellectual openness. How completely this can be achieved has been called into serious question by thinkers such as Freud in the West and Nagarjuna in the East; nevertheless, it is the ideal which must be adopted if our tendency toward seeing the universe through our biased beliefs only is to be counteracted. Recognition of this difficulty along with attempts to deal with it in academic study and inter-religious dialogue has been a significant contribution of the phenomenologists of religion.⁴ The requirement for intellectual openness means that we must not bind reality to any one description as absolute. It requires, as Smart has helpfully put it, that we treat each religious description as a “bracketed Expression” which is both evocative and descriptive of the believer’s experience of reality.⁵ In this way conflicting viewpoints can engage in dialogue without the necessity of imposing themselves on one another.

I also agree with Panikkar’s second principle of loyalty to one’s own religion, although I have some reservation about the way it is expressed. Panikkar seems exactly right when he describes dialogue as the full encounter of two religious experiences. The problem comes with the further statement that true dialogue occurs only when the doctrines are considered merely as starting points for reaching the reality underlying them. (3, pp. 2 and 4). It is the phrasing of reality only in the singular that is the problem. If Professor Panikkar would be willing to say “reality or realities underlying them,” I would be happy. His statement “Religions meet where religions take their source” (3, p. 10) is more acceptable so long as “source” is not presumed to be necessarily singular.

All of this is to anticipate my complete disagreement with Panikkar’s

final principle, namely, that “Christ is the meeting ground, the point of encounter in all inter-religious dialogue” (3, p. 5). Panikkar’s interpretation here seems to me to pose serious problems for the Christian, because of the way Christ is understood, and for the other partner in the dialogue, because he is told (by implication, at least) that the descriptive expression provided by his own religious tradition is inadequate — since underneath it is really nothing but the Christ *logos*. Here Panikkar seems to me to be guilty of reductionism both in his treatment of Christ from the Christians’ viewpoint, and in his interpretation of the other tradition.

I have already stated my objections to the notion that the outer forms of a religion can be stripped off leaving only the inner essence. To strip the Christian experience of “Christ” of all its cultural and historical forms requires that it be completely detached from Jesus of Nazareth and his subsequent place in the Christian tradition. Even if that were possible (and I hold it not to be), it would mean that we would no longer be confronted with a finite revelation but rather with a divine infinite. Christ as mediator and revealer has been swallowed up in an infinite God *logos* and is therefore in principle unknowable. Even in medieval scholasticism I believe that Christ as the essential revelation of God was seen to be known through his form or accidents. Thus, it seems to me that Panikkar’s Christology must be judged to be disloyal to the Christian tradition and therefore unacceptable as a basis for inter-religious dialogue.

The problem is equally unhappy from the perspective of the other participant in the dialogue. When the Hindu, for example, is told that once he strips his religious experience of its outer coverings that none other than the Christ *logos* will stand revealed, I can only believe that he will be deeply offended. Offended, because in his view his Brahmanical religious experience is being reduced to some Christian form. This, to him, will betray a lack of honesty, openness and sensitivity on the part of the Christian and will effectively destroy the possibility for inter-religious dialogue. Of course this is not what Professor Panikkar intends, nor do I think he would be so insensitive in a situation of inter-religious dialogue. The difficulty has its root, I submit, in his notion that “essence” can somehow be separated from “form” in religious experience. In my view the Hindu is right in his assumption that the insistence on a Christ, even a *logos* Christ, as the inner essence of all religion, is an unacceptable superimposition of Christian form on his Brahmanical experience. Even an Advaita Vedantin who, of all Hindus, might be most sympathetic to the possibility of separating essence from form would, I suggest, totally reject the replacement of the *Mahāvākyas* and the vedic *sat*, *cit* and *ānanda* with “Christ logos” as a “pointer” to that essence.

Notes

¹This understanding of the relationship between *inter* and *intra* religious dialogue seems to be shared by Jacob Needleman in his *The New Religions* (Richmond Hill: Pocket Books, 1972) and to be very close to Klaus Klostermaier’s observation, “Self-reflection often requires the

(Continued on p. 192)

gious traditions (which is another way of saying human traditions in their ultimate roots) remains a dynamic challenge and a problem: indeed, my experience of the Mystery is not independent of my vision of the sacramental structure, and this latter is subsidiary to my insertion in a socio-historical milieu. We cannot go directly to *x*; we cannot even point towards it outside our *y*, and independently of our *z*. Thus, according to me it does not have any meaning to say whether *x* is one or many. Ultimate problems are not objectifiable.

Why then the symbol Christ? — you will rightly ask. We agree that it is not the name I want to preserve, and yet I would like not to throw away the symbol too quickly. And this for three reasons:

1) *Historico-Sociological*. For one fourth of humanity this word still is a living symbol, although so often 'microdoxically' viewed, experienced, and believed. A deepening and even *conversion* may be more constructive than mere destruction, which would produce only a new Ersatz and a counter-reaction. I am not an iconoclast, but neither am I an idolator. My point is that the true encounter of religious traditions is not to be handled like a political meeting by mutual commutual compromises, but rather like

promises, but rather like the religious quest itself, by deepening the very sense of our belief.

2) *Philosophical*. For intrinsic reasons which I have tried to develop elsewhere, I am convinced that, appropriately interpreted or experienced, Christ can be one of the living symbols capable of giving a center (if you allow the metaphor) to the rich variety and depth of human experience. 'Woman,' as in the period of chivalry for instance, would not do; and 'Money' would yield an insufficient symbolic power. And I have my doubts about 'God' as an adequate symbol. But, I repeat, what we need today is an encounter in depth of ultimate symbols.

3) *Religious*. For the mutual enriching of the human experience as it reaches toward harmony, a deeper consciousness and realization of oneness, without monochromatic uniformity, the symbols Christ is an appropriate 'partner.' He is ready to die again — if you can sustain the double and dangerous metaphor. Here at least is one symbol of that cosmotheandric unity I referred to before.

This is what your fine study prompted me to say, but obviously the process is open . . .

RAIMUNDO PANIKKAR

Coward Notes (Continued from p. 189)

stimulus of the other," in his "Hindu-Christian Dialogue on Truth," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, vol. XII, no. 2, Spring 1975.

²The Christian Church to which I belong (The United Church of Canada), for example, has recently created a national "Inter-Church and Inter-Faith" advisory committee for the express purpose of preparing for and fostering both *intra* and *inter* faith dialogue.

³See for example the discussion of this point by J.B. Carman in Ch. 1, "A Phenomenological and Historical Approach to Rāmānuja's Theology," of his book, *The Theology of Rāmānuja: An Essay in Interreligious Understanding* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974).

⁴See, for example, Ninian Smart, *The Phenomenon of Religion* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1973), and the review by Richard Pummer, "The Methodology of the Science of Religion," *Numen*, Vol. 22, Dec. 1975, pp. 161–182.

⁵Ninian Smart, *The Phenomenon of Religion*, *op. cit.*, pp. 33–34.