

Raimon Panikkar, John Hick, and a Pluralist Theology of Religions

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Abstract

Although many Christian pluralist theologies of religion have been advocated in different forms to promote the real value of many religious traditions, critics most often target the classic pluralist proposal advanced by John Hick, one which explains the many religions as separate paths toward one transcendent goal. This paper traces the ways in which Raimon Panikkar's pluralist theology departs from Hick's by adopting a different response to Kantian epistemology. By relying on relational ontology and religious dialogue that exercises deconstruction of one's own presuppositions, Panikkar's pluralism better meets certain stated goals of pluralism like peace, cooperation, and increased mutual understanding among different religious communities.

Introduction

In the field of Christian theology of religions, the threefold typology of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism is commonly used to identify three broad positions on the possibility of truth and salvation in non-Christian traditions. Pluralism itself is a plurality of positions and has been advocated by theologians in a variety of very different ways. Nevertheless, when critics attack "the pluralist position", they tend still to hone their criticism exclusively on the classic proposals of John Hick. Many of these criticisms of Hick raise valid concerns about his disguised claim to objectivity and what is seen ultimately as yet another exclusivist position. However, the pluralistic proposals of Paul Knitter, S. Mark Heim, and Raimon Panikkar, to name a few, depart in important ways from Hick's proposal and incorporate concerns about noting real difference, particularity, and subjectivity. This paper investigates the degree to which Panikkar's pluralism is different from Hick's. First, we will briefly lay out the current landscape of Christian theology of religions, including Hick's classic proposal and the most commonly raised problems with it. We will then examine the pluralistic theology of Raimon Panikkar to determine whether it escapes the common criticisms made of Hick's pluralism.

Christian Theologies of Religions

The threefold typology of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism is still the dominant one used to lay out Christian positions on the possible salvific value of non-Christian religious traditions. Positions of exclusivism, or the more neutral term particularism, assert that the religious goal of salvation is possible exclusively within the Christian religion, that the claims made in Christian tradition about who Christ is and what God accomplished in Christ (human reconciliation or salvation) should be considered unique and true. According to this view, Christian claims are not just one mythic representation of a common human religious sensibility

but are concrete propositions about human destiny that demand the particular decision of a person to accept or deny them in his or her religious life.

While particularists may deny that this ultimate religious goal of salvation is possible outside the church proper, inclusivists might address the salvation of non-Christians in more inclusive ways: for example, that non-Christians may be saved yet, whether by a decision after death or by God's mysterious will, that a Christian understanding of the abundance and infinity of God's love allows Christians to hope for the potential salvation of all, or that whatever is found to be true and salvific in other traditions is ultimately the work of God in Christ. Some inclusivists suggest that these other traditions may contain a partial or limited religious truth that is explicitly and most fully realized in Christianity.

Pluralism refers to a range of positions that affirm the potential ultimate value of many different traditions. Different religious traditions may have authentic religious value and lead to salvation or liberation. Pluralists like John Hick define the goal of religion, or "salvation", as the transformation from ego-centeredness to Reality-centeredness, and then argue that the various religious traditions of the world all share this common goal. (Hick 1989, 240) According to Hick's pluralism, different religious traditions represent different particular paths to the same ultimate goal. The differences between them are only superficial, then, like cultural flavor, and not substantive differences that persist in the final aims of religious life.

Common Criticisms of Hick's Pluralism

Three related problems emerge with Hick's pluralism: a claim to objectivity, a reduction of actual difference, and a marginalization of religious perspectives. (See *Four Views of Salvation in a Pluralistic World*, edited by Dennis Okholm and Timothy Phillips as well as Gavin D'Costa's *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity* for examples of these criticisms.) The first is that in proclaiming that the different religious traditions represent different paths to one common goal, he is arguing for a neutral and objective meta-perspective, one that transcends the subjectivity of each of the different religious perspectives. While Muslims, Christians and Hindus, for example, may be conditioned by the limits of their respective traditions of revelation, Hick's pluralist represents the neutral and objective scientist of religion who can see beyond all these partial perspectives and even discern the true goal of each of these paths. Hick's "pluralism by meta-perspective" claims a bird's-eye view of the situation and a unique position from which to judge truth-claims. Although pluralism explicitly rejects the exclusivist position that only one community has the full and final take on Reality, critics like Gavin D'Costa maintain that Hick is advocating what is basically again an exclusivist position; in this case, the "objective" student of religion alone, and not the particular religious follower, has unique access to religious truth. (D'Costa 2000, 47)

Other critics like S. Mark Heim argue that although pluralism promises to address postmodern concerns of validating genuine difference among world cultures, it ends up diminishing and collapsing those differences by seeing them all as only superficial flavors of what is ultimately a single common goal of religious life. (Heim 1995) Hick's pluralism in one sense reduces the unique and particular claims that comprise the world of each tradition.

The third problem emerges out of the first two. Such a meta-perspective is not only just as subjective and particular as any of the traditional religious perspectives, but in fact it appeals only to the nonreligious and especially to those who have been contemptuous of religion. Hick's meta-perspective immediately claims superiority over all other partial perspectives and therefore fails the ideal it seeks to implement. Instead of valuing subjectivity and difference, it reduces actual differences and claims a higher, objective view over all religious perspectives.

At the heart of these three problems is that Hick's pluralism applies Kantian skepticism to the myths of religious communities, but not to its own mythic perspective of neutrality. If we cannot certifiably know the Real through demonstrable empirical reason, we cannot talk about it critically. Without any concrete knowledge of the Real, all we have are the multiple hypothetical renderings of the Real. All we have is religious myth. All particular religious claims are, relatively speaking, accepted yet failed attempts to do the impossible. My feeling is that a little relativism is not a bad thing; it can be quite instructive and a helpful antidote for the absolutism that often dominates religious discourse. However, Hick's pluralism is not satisfying, because it applies that conclusion of relativism only to particular religious claims and not substantially to its own position. Panikkar takes a different approach altogether and rejects the metaphysical premise of Kantian skepticism.

Panikkar and Kant

To understand how Panikkar's position of pluralism is different from Hick's, we need to lay out four particular components that are fundamental to Panikkar's thinking. These are the proposals he makes in different texts cited below of what he calls ontological knowledge, the cosmotheandric principle, dialogical dialogue, and pluralism. The first two demonstrate Panikkar's relationship to Kantian epistemology, and the last two demonstrate his practical program of pluralism and what he intends to accomplish through it.

Two components of Kant's work have influenced how philosophers have viewed religious knowledge ever since: he separated knowledge from ultimate reality itself, and he restricted religion to its practical value of supporting morality. First, he restricted rational knowledge to our mental organization of sense experience. Kant's intention was to clarify the limits of critical reason, and leave room for matters of faith. The latter could not be experienced and understood through critical reason, but instead lay on a solid moral foundation. The limitation of knowledge to what we can experience has been used as the groundwork for a modern agnosticism. We can know nothing beyond the appearance of things (*phenomena*). We cannot through critical reason access independent things themselves (*noumena*). Metaphysics is doomed to failure insofar as it claims a critical and certain knowledge of the Real insofar as it is independent of its appearance to us. Hick proceeds to apply this resulting agnosticism to all particular religious claims but then claims to understand the Real that is an object or goal of the different religions through his philosophical meta-perspective.

Second, religious ideas about the self, the universe, and God have practical value and are foundational in that they regulate our knowledge. Kant saw a practical rationality in religious beliefs about God and the immortality of the soul. We cannot know that God exists, according to Kant, but it is rational to postulate that God exists, because such an idea is necessary for reason

to make sense of experience. Kant intended this to justify a rational faith, one that is not knowledge (because knowledge cannot access ultimate reality independent of our experience) and that is not a blind acceptance of revelation (which is outside the bounds of rationality). Instead, religious ideas were to constitute a rational faith because these ideas of the soul and God help ensure moral reason. However, this rehabilitation of religion on a solid moral foundation is often ignored and the inability to know anything about God is often emphasized today. This is where Panikkar's ontological knowledge and cosmotheandric principle depart from Kantian epistemology and reaffirm the responsibility of reasonable knowledge of the sacred.

Ontological Knowledge

Panikkar rejects the Enlightenment and Kantian separation of knowledge and beings. He refers to this split between epistemology and ontology as "hunter's epistemology". According to the hunter's epistemology, the hunter or subject searches for a target, its object, and then shoots at it after bringing it into focus as a clear and distinct idea. As an alternative, Panikkar offers "ontological knowledge", which rejects that subject-object dualistic paradigm. "Ontological knowledge, on the other hand, requires the knower so to grow as to be able to embrace the known - to reach a certain identification between the two." (Panikkar 1996, 237) This ontological knowledge is not a return to pre-critical knowledge or to simple identity monism. It does not presume unity or identity between different particulars and therefore reject the need for our relating them together. Instead, it presumes their interrelationship. What I encounter to know is not one with me; what I encounter is already related to me and wrapped up with what I myself am. Our individual identities are built on the basis of our mutually constitutive relationships with each other.

Panikkar turns the process of knowledge into a self-transformation within the knower. This respects the priority and integrity of the object of knowledge insofar as it does not consume it or change it. Instead, the knower bears greater responsibility to modify herself in order to accommodate the object of knowledge on its own terms. The process of knowledge is no longer a model of shooting at a chosen target, and hitting or missing. What occurs in knowledge is an active change of relationship between entities, and as a consequence, a change of identities.

Cosmotheandric Principle

Panikkar's hypothesis of interrelationality among things depends on the theological intuition he describes as cosmotheandricism. The cosmic, the divine, and the human are three irreducible dimensions that make up the Real. Panikkar proposes that this triadic intuition exists both in consciousness and in reality. (Panikkar 1993, 62) Frank Podgorski refers to interrelatedness as "the hermeneutical key to understand and 'stand under' the mythos which both reveals and yet conceals reality." (Podgorski 1996, 107) No one element can subsist or be understood in isolation. Reality is defined as the *perichoresis* of the three together. They are not one, but all three dimensions characterize every moment of reality and experience.

The cosmotheandric principle elucidates that every being has a transcendent dimension and an immanent dimension, by which it both escapes us and is experienced by us. The element

of the freedom of being, its mystery or endless openness, characterizes the divine dimension. (D'Sa 1996, 35) The human dimension of every being lies in its knowability and its life in our creative interpretations and appropriations. The earthly dimension is the secular or worldly. Everything that is related to human consciousness or experience is tied to the universe. Human experience is bounded by the world. All experience, therefore, is *worlded*, so to speak. Panikkar also describes cosmotheandricism as the inter-relationship among an I, Thou, and It, in which "I" refers to the divine experience, "Thou" refers to the human experience of being addressed by God, and the "It" refers to the cosmos as the context of this sacred relationship. (Panikkar 1996, 238)

The three dimensions considered as irreducible but interdependent dimensions describe the nature of reality that constitutes the identity of any being. Reality is not a passive unconscious object waiting for us to acquire it in our sights but rather, it is a living network of relationships. For Panikkar, the Ultimate Mystery does not exist "in itself" beyond human experience, but within the diversity of humanity and world. He explains that the particular names ascribed to this mystery are not just labels attached onto this mystery, but that "each authentic name enriches and qualifies that Mystery which is neither purely transcendent nor purely immanent." (Panikkar 1981, 23) Although Panikkar rejects an ontotheological metaphysics, the cosmotheandric intuition sets up a theoretical foundation for his practical programs of pluralism and inter-religious dialogue. At its core, Reality is not experienced as a static reality, but as a dynamic perichoresis of the ineffable, the knowable, and the material dimensions of reality.

With ontological knowledge and the cosmotheandric intuition, Panikkar intends to help remedy the phenomenological problem of religious knowledge that emerges with Kant. The concern over how to know what is beyond knowledge is replaced with the concern of how to describe and correct the relationship between humanity, God, and cosmos. We know the sacred, even if we define it through intuition rather than critical reason to be beyond ordinary empirical experience, because we already participate in a relationship with it that constitutes both it and us.

Dialogical Dialogue

In *The Intrareligious Dialogue*, Panikkar outlines the rules of encounter with those of other religious traditions. What Panikkar means by "intrareligious dialogue" is that before any of us engage in dialogue with people of another religious tradition, we must first have within ourselves an inner dialogue between our own system of commitments and that other tradition. Whereas *dialectical dialogue* trusts an all-powerful Reason that ensures the reasonableness of the other and of the whole process, *dialogical dialogue* trusts in the other as a mutual subject; it is a dialogue among subjects about themselves. The aim of such openness is to place the other in a position not simply of equality but even of priority. Dialogue with those of other religious traditions therefore becomes a religious exercise of humility and unknowing, as one opens one's presuppositions to be inspected and challenged by the other. For Panikkar as for Paul Knitter, religious dialogue requires that one be fully prepared and willing even to be converted by the other's position.

The justification of the dialogical dialogue, Panikkar explains, lies “in the very nature of the real, namely in the fact that reality is not wholly objectifiable, ultimately because I myself, a subject, am also a part of it, am in it, and cannot extricate myself from it. The dialogical dialogue assumes a radical dynamism of reality, namely that reality is not given once and for all, but is real precisely in the fact that it is continually creating itself.” (Panikkar 1999, 31) Instead of presuming the existence of a “thing in itself” or an atomism in which human beings were each independent monads, dialogical dialogue assumes “that we all share in a reality that does not exist independently and outside our own sharing in it, and yet without exhausting it. Our participation is always partial, and reality is more than just the sum total of its parts.” (Panikkar, 1999 37) This view of dialogue almost moves beyond the logos-structure of reality, by rejecting the ultimacy of the dialectical view of reality as something we eventually, through target practice, come to know. Instead, dialogical thinking embraces the other’s uncovering of my own myths, which I take for granted. The other helps expose my presuppositions as what they are, and then I can either discard them or incorporate them into my conscious assumptions upon which I build. Panikkar says in the style of mysticism that I trust the other not out of an ethical principle of duty, but because I have experienced the ‘Thou’ as the counterpart of the ‘I’: “I discover the Thou as part of a Self that is as much mine as his - or to be more precise, that is as little my property as his.” (Panikkar 1999, 38)

Dialogical dialogue incorporates the priority of the human other that Emmanuel Levinas prescribes as an ethical-religious principle. All we can access in the other is the face of the other person, which reveals something to us, but which conceals vastly more from us, and beyond which we cannot presume access. To attempt to know the other any further would be an act of sheer violence. In the context of an inter-religious encounter, this implies not tolerance, but one’s accountability for one’s religious convictions before the other. It means that I expose my convictions that support me at the deepest level of my being and allow the other to inspect them and to interrogate me, because this discourse is itself revelatory.

Pluralism

Too many critics lump together the different proposals of pluralism and most often attack all of them on the basis of the particular pluralist hypothesis made by John Hick. Panikkar’s pluralism is quite different, first and foremost because while Hick accepts the skeptical consequences of Kantian epistemology, Panikkar rejects the premise of Enlightenment epistemology and instead proposes discourse based on the relational ontology of the cosmotheandric intuition. Panikkar explicitly denies that pluralism means that there are many different truths or that there are different ways of expressing one truth (as Hick’s pluralism suggests). The word pluralism may not be ideal to suggest the posture he prescribes of openness to the mystery and contingency and freedom of reality to manifest itself. Terms like Trinity and *Advaita* express this non-objectifiable mystery in orthodox Christian and Hindu language. (Panikkar 1981, 24) Pluralism is not a theoretical system or an attitude that respects religious diversity, but an attitude that respects the freedom of reality to transcend our systematizing efforts to contain and define it. It actively resists the tendency to absolutize any claims to validity. Pluralism affirms that “there is a *fluxus quo* which will never permit us to freeze

anything real, that reality and the logos itself are open-ended.” (Panikkar 1996, 255) Contra Hegel, Panikkar rejects a panlogicism and denies that logos is the whole of human truth, and with the spirit of Heidegger, he affirms the opacity of Being as it unconceals itself and yet maintains itself outside the light of logos. In Panikkar’s usage, then, pluralism becomes a rejection of a rational logocentrism. As he writes, “pluralism is not a supersystem, a meta-language...an intellectual panacea. Pluralism is an open, human attitude, which therefore entails an intellectual dimension that overcomes any kind of solipsism, as if we - any we - were alone in the universe, the masters of it, the holders of the Absolute.” (Panikkar 1996, 257) For Panikkar, pluralism is a religious prescription of extreme humility and a reminder to live without total security, to dwell religiously in our vulnerability. He describes this in the paradigm of Christian mysticism as kenosis. “Only when a Man is completely empty of himself, is in a state of kenosis, of renunciation and annihilation, will Christ fulfill his incarnation in him. Only kenosis allows incarnation and incarnation is the only way to redemption.” (Panikkar 1981, 61) The exercise of self-emptying or deconstruction is a religious mandate, in a sense. This is why pluralism and intrareligious dialogue are necessary for Panikkar.

Conclusion

We have traced the ways in which Panikkar’s pluralism begins from a different response to Kantian epistemology than does Hick’s. The guiding question is whether Panikkar’s pluralism escapes the problems ascribed to Hick’s pluralism. The central problems with Hick’s pluralism are the claim to objectivity, the reduction of actual difference, and the marginalization of religious perspectives. The first may be a valid objection, but Hick defends his proposal as only a hypothesis and not an exclusive access to religious truth. The second and third problems are more serious. The marginalization of all particular religious views is seriously problematic and effectively undermines the presumed goals of such pluralism, namely, peace, cooperation, and increased mutual understanding. A conversation about the relationship among the religions simply cannot occur primarily apart from religious insiders.

We can see that Panikkar’s pluralism avoids at least these particular problems that beset Hick’s. First of all, by moving away from Enlightenment and Kantian epistemology, and towards a relational ontology in which we are constituted by our relationships with each other, with God, and with the world, Panikkar avoids the problem of skepticism where there is no way to connect our knowledge with reality. Knowledge itself becomes a process of growth and self-transformation rather than hitting a target whose existence before us we cannot even guarantee. The relational ontology at the center of the cosmotheandric intuition is a mystical intuition of the interrelated dimensions of the sacred. This is explicitly a theological vision. While Hick’s pluralism excludes religious insiders, it is possible that Panikkar’s pluralism restricts the conversation too narrowly to one that can occur only among religious insiders with particular theological commitments. However, much of Panikkar’s recent writings suggest an expansive definition of the category of the religious beyond what is institutional to what is a dimension of ultimacy. He suggests the possibility that purely secular insights may in the contemporary scene be more ‘religious’ in the sense of ultimacy than those of traditionally religious institutions. (Panikkar 1995, 33) In particular, because Panikkar’s pluralism is an attitude of

resisting reification, it easily incorporates the capacity of secular insights to challenge any dogmatic attempts to contain and constrain transcendence.

In short, the greatest difference between Panikkar's pluralism and Hick's is that, for Panikkar, pluralism is itself a religious task, revealing Panikkar's commitment to work squarely within a religious tradition. His views are distinctly Christian and Catholic. He says an authentic inter-religious encounter is possible only because "it is an encounter in the Presence of the one who is already present in the hearts of those who *in good faith* belong to one or the other of the two religions." (Panikkar 1981, 58) He says elsewhere that Hinduism and Christianity both meet in God. He is guided throughout by a distinctly Christian faith in God who becomes incarnate, who reveals Godself, to be *Immanuel*, or "God with us". He is guided also by a distinctly Catholic striving towards unity and universality. He identifies in Christianity a thirst to realize unity with the hope "that all may be one." (Panikkar 1981, 55) However, this unity or oneness should not be mistaken for uniformity. The goal of the inter-religious encounter is not assimilation of each other's views, but rather mutual enrichment and growth. Such enrichment and growth can result only from an approach that is kenotic, or self-emptying. He describes this process variously as an outgoing mutual love that overcomes the egocentricity of knowledge, as a special asceticism that strips off all external form for "a lonely vigil with Christ... dead *and* alive on the Cross", and as a communion *in* Christ and *of* Christ. (Panikkar 1981, 58-60)

When we look at the rules Panikkar institutes for intrareligious dialogue and what he means by pluralism as a vigilant openness to the mystery of reality, it is clear that it does not fall prey to the common criticisms made of the pluralist position and does advance the goals of peace, cooperation, and mutual understanding. Most important, and most attractive, I think, is that Panikkar's pluralist position aims not at some kind of live and let live tolerance among different perspectives, but instead at a dynamic religious interaction. While Hick's pluralism presumes a neat ordering of different paths to one common and higher religious goal, Panikkar's pluralism prescribes a religious posture of openness that stays quite messy and dynamic. It is this dynamism that marks the religious posture of kenosis for Panikkar, as we humans respond to an eternally infinite mystery that continually interrupts the totalities of our respective experiences and reminds us of their very incompleteness. Dialogue is justifiable not primarily because we all need to get along with each other, but because we need contradictory truth-claims to jolt us out of our complacency, ignorance, and ingrained preconceptions. Rather than subject religion to some comprehensive Reason, Panikkar's pluralism presents the challenges of inter-religious encounter as first and foremost a religious task. Subjecting our myths to the criticisms of others helps us grow in our sacred interrelationality. Pluralism describes reality's infinite transcendence of our attempts to contain it, and it prescribes the religious task of kenotic unknowing to better grow in our dynamic relationship with others, with God, and with the world.

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