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Introduction:

Who is Raimon Panikkar, Why this Book, and Why Now?

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Who is Raimon Panikkar?

The answer to this question is straightforward if what one asks for is just “name, rank, and number,” what Panikkar calls “identification.” Panikkar was born in Spain on 3 November 1918 and died in his homeland, more precisely, in Tavertet, Catalonia, on 26 August 2010. But, for Panikkar, this apparently simple question about who Raimon Panikkar is does not have a simple answer, since for him “identification” is not “identity,” the former having to do with what one is born with, the latter with what one has become in one’s deepest reality, and Panikkar is much more interested in “identity” than in “identification.” But even Panikkar’s “identification” is not simple. First, is his given name Raimon, Raimundo, or Raymond? His earliest English works list Raimundo, whereas the later ones, as well as the twelve-volume *Opera Omnia*, use Raimon. So Raimon it is. In the next chapter Milena Carrara Pavan, the editor of Panikkar’s *Opera Omnia* in Italian and his literary executor, gives us a portrait of her friend, and so it would be superfluous to rehearse the details of Panikkar’s life here. There is, however, one important element in Panikkar’s life and work, symbolized by the pluriformity of his first name, that justifies – and perhaps even necessitates – this book, and that is the complexity of Panikkar’s person and thought.

Raimon Panikkar-Alemaný – the full name of the subject of our study, according to Spanish naming customs. His first name Raimon is Catalan, Raimondo its Castilian, and Raymond its English equivalent;

Panikkar is his father's family name, and Alemany his mother's. Perhaps no one, by family heritage, linguistic competence, intellectual formation, and religious belonging, is more equipped than Panikkar to build what he terms the "*visión de síntesis del universo*."¹

Born in Barcelona of a Catalan mother and an Indian father, Panikkar embodies not only a mixture of ethnicities but also a symbiosis of widely divergent cultures. Fluent in a dozen languages, classical as well as modern, Asian as well as European, he is not shy to use throughout his voluminous writings one tongue rather than another when precision and subtlety of thought demands it, and to coin new terms, or to give a twist to old ones, that have become the shibboleths of his thought. Armed with three doctorates – philosophy, chemistry, and theology – Panikkar effortlessly crisscrosses widely disparate academic fields and synthesizes their findings into a kaleidoscope of surprising and mutually enriching insights. His oft-quoted autobiographical confession, "I left Europe as a Christian and found myself a Hindu, and returned as a Buddhist without ever having ceased to be a Christian," not only reveals the heritage of his mother's Christian faith and his father's Hinduism, but also expresses in a nutshell his religious and spiritual development, and his ability to hold together, in what he calls an "intra-religious dialogue," at first sight mutually incompatible religious traditions. To this list of religions one may add Judaism, Islam, Chinese religious traditions, modernity, and postmodernity, religious and nonreligious worlds in which he dwells simultaneously. Personally, Panikkar combines priestly monkhood and marriage in a way that is canonically anomalous in the Roman Catholic Church. Panikkar is thus essentially cross-ethnic, cross-cultural, and cross-religious, all at once.

Who then is Raimon Panikkar? Two words seem to best describe his "identity": complexity and harmony. Complexity, because of the many strands – and we have "identified" only a few of them above – that have conspired to make him the person he is. He has been called philosopher, scientist, historian of religions, comparativist of religion, theologian, and mystic. Most of us mere mortals can at best be "identified" by one, or at most two, of these monikers. Panikkar's vast and multifarious erudition and his immense literary productions in all these fields rightly earn him all these appellations.

The last of these titles, "mystic," is often applied to people who hold that the divine or the absolute is beyond the grasp of rational thought, or reason, and who attempt to achieve union with this transcendent

1. Raimon Panikkar, "Síntesis: Visión de Síntesis del Universo," *Arbor* 1 (1944): 5-40.

reality through prayer, contemplation, and self-surrendering love. With no pretension to canonize Panikkar, it is reasonable to say that he fully matches this description of a mystic, and that it is precisely this mystical dimension of his life and thought that conveys harmony to his complexity.² Panikkar himself confesses his early desire to embark upon the monastic life, albeit in an unconventional way: “Since my early youth I have seen myself as a monk, but one without a monastery, or at least without walls other than those of the entire planet. . . . By monk, *monachos*, I understand that person who aspires to reach the ultimate goal of life with all his being by renouncing all that is not necessary to it.”³

Epistemologically, this mystical union is achieved by the exercise of a holistic imagination which integrates a scientifically rigorous investigation of the material world with a sense of the cosmos as sacred, producing what Panikkar calls “scientific secularity.” Hermeneutically, Panikkar calls his own method of interpretation “diatopical,” the way of understanding (at least) two cultures cross-culturally, without presupposing a common tradition or mutual influence between them. Philosophically, Panikkar advocates and practices philosophy not simply as an academic disciple governed by logic and discursive reason but also as a way of life, philosophy being both love of wisdom and wisdom of love. Theologically, Panikkar expresses this mystical union as the “cosmotheandric consciousness,” that is, the existential – and not merely rational – awareness of the fundamental unity of the trinity of God, humankind, and the world, all three realities existing not independently of each other but in symbiotic dependence as the “Rhythm of Being.” This is Panikkar’s “vision of synthesis of the world,” which he already expounded in his very first publication, in 1949, as mentioned above.

Why This Book?

The paragraph above is intentionally peppered with Panikkarian neologisms that will no doubt baffle those new to his philosophy. But, even for professional philosophers and theologians, Panikkar remains an elusive thinker, not only because of his many linguistic innovations, but also because his thought presupposes extensive background knowledge in several disciplines that is uncommon today. There have, of course, been many dissertations and secondary studies on Panikkar, and no

2. See Panikkar, *IH*.

3. Panikkar, *BS*.

doubt there will be many more as his life and work become better known. But the genre of these learned disquisitions often compounds the problem with obscurities of their own.

One exception is a *Festschrift* for Panikkar, published in 1996, and entitled *The Intercultural Challenge of Raimon Panikkar*.⁴ It is a collection of thirteen essays, in addition to the editor's Introduction and a long response by Panikkar to them. (Of these authors, two, namely, Joseph Prabhu and Francis D'Sa, have written for this present volume.) The essays are of excellent quality but they are addressed to fellow scholars – especially undergraduate and graduate students – and not to the average reader. Also, twenty-two years have elapsed since its publication and an updating of the scholarship is called for.

Given the potentially enormous impact of Panikkar's thought – on this, more below – and given its elusiveness, which may prove forbidding to non-specialists, we seek in this volume to provide an accessible and reliable guide to or a companion for Panikkar. It is not of course meant to be a replacement for a patient and intensive wrestling with Panikkar's writings themselves, perhaps eventually with his magnum opus and *summa theologiae*, that is, *The Rhythm of Being: The Unbroken Trinity*. Part I provides a life and a portrait of Panikkar as a thinker engaged in what he calls "intra-religious dialogue" and "dialogical dialogue," as he lives out Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism fully and simultaneously.

Even though Panikkar does not write as a "systematic" theologian – he is for "synthesis" and against "system" – Part II introduces his hermeneutical method and organizes his thought along the *loci theologici* familiar to students of theology. Thus, readers will gain clear insights into Panikkar's theology of spirituality, wisdom, the Trinity, Christology, anthropology, gender and sexuality, social justice, and eschatology. The final chapter by a comparative theologian, who shares with Panikkar expertise in and love for Hinduism, looks back at the essays and gives a prospective glance at what theology would look like "After Panikkar." The book is appended with a glossary and a brief English-language bibliography to help further research. Without dumbing down Panikkar's highly complex ideas and categories we hope that the book will serve as a helpful guide to and a constructive critique of Panikkar and will stimulate a fruitful discussion in and outside the classroom.

4. Joseph Prabhu, ed., *The Intercultural Challenge of Raimon Panikkar* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996).

Why this Book Now?

Publishers and authors tend to highlight (and not rarely exaggerate) the opportuneness of the book that is being published in hopes of huge sales. Fortunately, there is no need to do so with this volume, and this brings us to the last point of this Introduction. Panikkar has been blessed with rare longevity – almost ninety-two years. In fact, he spanned the length and breadth of the twentieth century and was able to witness the devastation of the two World Wars, colonialism, and struggles for national independence in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, the collapse of communism, and the hegemony of neo-capitalism, life-saving drugs and medical technologies, human cloning and voluntary euthanasia, the Apollo moon landing and space exploration, international peacemaking and nuclear proliferation, the rise of Islam as a global religion, religious fundamentalism, stateless terrorism, the Internet and social media, globalization and the dominance of the West, the legalization of abortion and same-sex marriage, and the threat of ecological annihilation, to cite a few of the things unimaginable to people living in the nineteenth century.

Though not a public intellectual in the sense of an authoritative commentator on the cultural and social issues of the day, from his vantage point of a near-centenarian and from his deep and prolonged meditations on the resources of almost all world religions, especially *The Vedic Experience*, Panikkar, as scientist, philosopher, theologian, and mystic, offers us insights from the perennial yet ever-timely wisdom of both East and West on how to meet the challenges posed by the phenomena listed above.⁵ Of course, he cannot be expected to devise concrete technical plans to remove these threats to the survival of humanity. This task cannot be done by anyone alone, Donald Trump’s bombastic boast that he alone can “fix” them, notwithstanding, which claim is precisely the problem and not the solution! Rather, Panikkar can and does indicate in detail the ways in which humanity can be lifted out of its current moral and spiritual morass. He does this by reminding us of his “*visión de síntesis del universo*,” *The Cosmotheandric Experience*, in which we humans (*anthropos*) are ontologically related to the divine (*theos*) and the world (*kosmos*). Without this “cosmotheandric,” or “theanthropocosmic,” or “anthropotheocosmic,” or “theocosmoanthropic” consciousness – the order in which this trinity of realities is listed is unimportant since one component cannot exist without the other two – to guide our living together, all technical solutions are mere temporary bandages for a deadly disease.

5. In what follows the titles of Panikkar’s main works are woven into the text, indicated by italics. For their bibliographical details, consult Bibliography.

Take, for instance, the most urgent global threat of our time, namely, ecological destruction. Panikkar's central insight on the ontological divine-human-cosmic unity moves us to think of these three realities together, as indissolubly one-yet-distinct, such that the survival of one component is the condition of possibility of the survival of the other two. Thus, the ecological problem is not just a cosmological problem; it is indissolubly theological and anthropological. The cosmos cannot survive without the survival of God and humanity; God cannot survive without the survival of humanity and the cosmos; and humanity cannot survive without the survival of the cosmos and God. Thus, to rely only on technological means to "save" the Earth is short-sighted and ineffective, because it will be only empty and a void – the *tohu wa-bohu* of Genesis 1:2 – and not the "home" of God and humanity and *A Dwelling Place for Wisdom*. On the other hand, to "save" God, that is, defending God's existence and presence in the world – the perennial preoccupation of believers – without saving Earth and humanity at the same time turns God into a remote despot. To "save" humanity, that is, making humans the center or the summit of the universe – the overriding concern of modernity – condemns humans to eternal loneliness, without a garden in Eden (Genesis 2:8) to cultivate and live in, and without God as a partner "walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze" (Genesis 3:8).

Similarly, the way to peace is not simply conflict resolution and international peacekeeping, albeit necessary and helpful, but *Cultural Disarmament*. Again, the way to combat religious fundamentalism and violence is not only inter-religious dialogue but, first of all, *The Intra-religious Dialogue*. This intra-religious dialogue, assisted by a method of understanding diverse religious traditions that combines *Myth, Faith, and Hermeneutics*, leads us to see *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*, *Christophany: The Fullness of Man*, and the *Trinity and the Religious Experience of Man*. What ultimately matters is not knowledge but love, which brings us to *The Experience of God: Icons of the Mystery* and finds fulfillment in *The Silence of God: The Answer to the Buddha*.

Sometime in December 2009, sensing that the end of his life was near, Panikkar sent a letter to his friends asking them not to contact him because he wanted to prepare for his final encounter with the Absolute Mystery in total silence. The silence, it turned out, lasted almost eight months, only to be interrupted by the announcement that his last book, *The Rhythm of Being: The Unbroken Trinity*, had seen the light of day after a twenty-year gestation. Ironically, this good news, which must have gladdened Panikkar's heart, did not interrupt but rather deepened

his spiritual silence. His final book, as will be mentioned later, was, by Panikkar's own decision, published without Chapter Nine, titled "The Survival of Being." In this sense, like Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae*, Panikkar's *The Rhythm of Being* is unfinished. But is not uncompleted. Like Aquinas, who allegedly said that all his writings were nothing but "straw" after his mystical experience, Panikkar confessed that the "ultimate questions" about which he had written in the last chapter "cannot have final answers" and that "I have touched the limits of my understanding and must stop here."⁶ But Panikkar's silence is not a fruit of despair but a sign of hope, not a period putting an end to a life-long intellectual quest, or a question mark doubting the necessity of it, but an exclamation point, one of joy and hope, because the Absolute Reality has indeed broken silence and uttered words that must be heard (*śruti*) and remembered (*smṛti*). This book is a humble attempt to make what Panikkar has heard and remembered continue to ring through generations to come.

6. Panikkar, *RB*.