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Panikkar and the Silence of the Buddha

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Raimon Panikkar famously said: "I 'left' as a Christian, 'found' myself a Hindu, and 'returned' a Buddhist, without having ceased to be a Christian."[1] This bold statement elicited overwhelming reactions, many with admiration, but some with criticism. In response, Panikkar wrote in his 1989 introduction to the English translation of *El Silencio del Dios*:[2]

> I have not recanted my Buddhist conversion, just as I did not abjure previous commitments and involvements. I believe I have purified and enlarged them. But I have not ended the pilgrimage of my life. . . . I have neither rejected Christ nor denied allegiance to other traditions. Why should we build walls of separation and feel jealous about constituencies? To extol one religious and human tradition does not mean to belittle the others.[3]

The irony is that Panikkar in his later years came to consider "Buddhism,""Hinduism," or "Christianity" as mere "labels," nothing to do with living a spiritual life. Still, I submit that there is room for a philosophical question to be raised here: in what way did he become, and what kind of, Hindu and Buddhist? How did he remain, and what kind of, a Christian? Here below, I shall focus on Buddhism, and analyze its impact on his philosophy and theological outlook.

1. Panikkar, *IRD*, 2; C.f. Scott Eastham, "Introduction," to Panikkar, *CE*, v.
2. Panikkar, *El Silencio del Dios* (Madrid: Guardiana, 1970).
3. Panikkar, "Preface to the English Edition," *SG*, xi–xii.

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It was in search of his own cultural and existential-spiritual roots that Panikkar first visited India in 1954, shortly after the death of his father. There he encountered such notable figures as Jules Monchanin, Bede Griffiths, and Henri Le Saux (Abhishiktananda) at the community of Shantivanam (the forest of peace). They were engaged in establishing a "relative theology" through their encounter with Hindu spirituality.[4] By the time Panikkar returned to Europe in 1958, he was already describing himself as "truly Christian and truly Hindu"[5] – a position baffling to many of his European Catholic friends. Be that as it may, he "found" himself a Hindu during his first stay in India.

Panikkar's scholarly interest in Buddhism probably arose in the early 1960s, postdating his return from his first sojourn in India. What he found in Buddhism was a philosophical-theological alternative to theism. His earliest work on Buddhism was a chapter he contributed to *Ateismo Contemporaneo* (Contemporary Atheism), entitled *Buddhismo e Ateismo* (Buddhism and Atheism).[6] This essay is of interest because it already contains the basic framework of his *El Silencio del Dios*, including his inquiry into "atheistic religiosity." In this essay, he goes into a detailed study of select Buddhist texts concerning some major philosophical notions such as *nairātmyavāda*, *nirvāna*, *pratītyasamupāda*, and *avyākritavastūni* – the key concepts that he would elaborate in his *El Silencio del Dios*, to which we shall return shortly. The work he began in *Buddhismo e Ateismo*, therefore, forms the foundation on which Panikkar continued to unfold his hermeneutical contemplation.

By May 1966 Panikkar was working on revising this essay into a book, *El Silencio del Dios*. His letter to Enrico Castelli, dated 6 May 1966, from Varanasi, sheds light on this. It reads: "Now I have some great insights into the famous silence of the Buddha (on which I am preparing a book)."[7] This letter was written shortly after he had left

4. Maciej Bielawski, *Panikkar: Una Biografía*, translated from Italian into Spanish by Jordi Pigem (Barcelona: Fragmenta Editorial, 2014), 108. The original in Italian is entitled *Panikkar: Un Uomo e il Suo Pensiero*, (Rome: Fazi Editore, 2013).
5. Enrico Castelli's diary of 19 May 1958. See Enrico Castelli, *Diari,* vol. IV (Padova: Casa Editrice Dott. Antonio Milani, 1998), 210.
6. Panikkar, "Buddhismo e ateismo," in *L'Ateismo Contemporaneo*, ed. Philosophy Department, Silesian Pontifical University in Rome, vol. 4 (Turin: Società Editrice Internazionale, 1969), 449–76. Panikkar refers to this earlier essay in his "Introduction" (1989) to *SG*, xvi.
7. Quoted in Bielawski, *Panikkar: Una Biografía*, 256–57; the Italian, *Panikkar: Un*

Opus Dei,[8] which experience "liberated" him as a thinker. With this newfound sense of freedom, he delved into developing his method of intercultural hermeneutics, and embarked on a serious dialogue with Buddhist thinkers past and present.

"A Bodhisattva Intellectual"

Panikkar's approach to Buddhism is pre-eminently philosophical,[9] but it is also religious, because for him the question of salvation, the "ultimate symbol of human goal,"[10] is never divorced from his philosophical reflections. Panikkar is a "religionist" and a "philosopher," a "theologian" and a "social critic," a "mystic" and an "intellectual," a Catholic priest and a professor at a secular university, all at once. For him the religious dimension of human experience constitutes a *sui generis* category, irreducible to any other.

It is very apt that the Belgian Benedictine Dominique Van Rolleghem (1904–95) called Panikkar a "bodhisattva intellectual."[11] Certainly, the noun "intellectual" captures Panikkar's philosophical approach to human conditions, while "bodhisattva," used adjectivally here, characterizes his sacerdotal or pastoral calling.[12] Bodhisattvas are those who work for the salvation of all sentient beings before attaining their own, and such a selfless commitment forms the goal for the followers of Mahayana Buddhism.[13] In my view, a bodhisattva does not necessarily have to be a practicing Buddhist, and a bodhisattva-action can be performed by anyone who is a bodhisattva at heart. The airline captain, who made the headlines a few years ago by skillfully landing his plane on the icy Hudson River in New York, then ensuring all the passengers and the crew had safely evacuated the aircraft, before leaving the sinking airplane himself, performs a bodhisattva action *par excellence* even though he is a practicing Christian.

Uomo e il Suo Pensiero, 203: "*Adesso ho delle grandi intuizioni sul famoso silenzio del Buddha (su cui sto preparando un libro*)."

8. Panikkar's letter to Castelli, 26 June 1966, from Varanasi: "I am no longer of Opus Dei; I am a secular priest." Quoted in Bielawski, *Panikkar: Una Biografia*, 217.
9. Panikkar, *SG*, 4.
10. Panikkar, "Presentation," in Nelly Shāntā, *The Unknown Pilgrims: The Voice of the Sādhivīs – The History, Spirituality and Life of the Jain Women Ascetics* (Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1997), 10.
11. Bielawski, *Panikkar: Un Uomo e il Suo Pensiero*, 205; *Panikkar: Una Biografía*, 259.
12. See for instance, Panikkar, "Meditation on Melchizedek," in *RR*, 137–49.
13. Mahāyāna Buddhism is a development of early Buddhism, largely propelled by the devotion of lay followers. This stream of Buddhism was transmitted to China, Vietnam, Korea, and Japan.

Buddhist Texts

To begin his study of Buddhism, Panikkar chooses Buddhist texts that retain "the authentic Buddhist spirit."[14] The majority of these texts are chosen from the Pāli Canon; these texts contain the sermons and acts of Gautama Siddhartha the Buddha (463–383B.C.E.)[15] and tell us the earliest days of the establishment of "Original Buddhism." Panikkar's choice of the texts reveals his desire to listen to the Buddha's words as directly and personally as possible, with as little distance from the Master as possible. Interesting also is the fact that all the texts are in English translations. In fact, Panikkar translated them from English to Italian in his *Buddhismo e Ateismo*. He exercises his etymological passion when called for and traces the meaning of crucial lexical items back to the original Sanskrit or Pāli to clarify their philosophical significance.

In *El Silencio del Dios*, Panikkar adds more scriptures from the Mahayana corpus, as he enlarges the horizon of his reflections on the meaning of the Buddha's silence.[16] It is to be noted here that his inquiry into the "silence of God" and especially into the philosophical interpretation of "emptiness" (śūnyatā) led him to engage in dialogue with the Kyoto School philosopher, Nishitani Keiji (1900–90).

The Starting Point of Buddhism

Panikkar begins his exposition of Buddhism with the "Four Noble Truths, Eightfold Path" – the famous sermon of the Buddha, which forms the basic tenets of Buddhism:

- *The First Noble Truth*: Life is full of suffering (*duhkha*).
- *The Second Noble Truth*: Suffering arises out of craving – namely, attachment to senses and external things.
- *The Third Noble Truth*: Because suffering arises out of a cause, it can be stopped by eliminating its cause, namely craving.
- *The Fourth Noble Truth*: In order to stop suffering and attain spiritual freedom, practice the Eightfold path as laid down by the

14. Panikkar, *SG*, 4.
15. These are the dates now established by Japanese Buddhologists such as Nakamura Hajime. Traditional scholarship upheld the dates of 623–543B.C.E. or 624–544B.C.E.
16. Major Mahayana texts mentioned by Panikkar include Nāgārjuna's *Mādhyamikakārikas*, the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra*, *Lankāvatāra Sūtra*, *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*, and some Japanese Zen texts.

> Buddha. The Eightfold path is the practice and the cultivation of "right view, right aim, right speech, right action, right living, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration."[17]

This is the very first sermon the Buddha gave at the Deer Park in Sārnāth following his attainment of Enlightenment in Bodhgaya.[18] It is clear then that the Buddha's teaching is not a set of dogmas, but a path to be practiced by each person. Panikkar rightly observes: "The road to salvation is not that of speculation, but that of the concrete *praxis* of the elimination of suffering."[19] Buddhism is a salient example of a religion that consists in orthopraxis.

The Key Philosophical Concepts

We now examine the four key Buddhist notions Panikkar selects, namely:

(i) *nairātmyavāda* (or the doctrine of *anātman* that there is no substantial "ego-self"),
(ii) *nirvāna* (attainment of spiritual peace),
(iii) *pratītyasamutpāda* (dependent co-origination), and
(iv) *avyākritavastūni* (a set of logical propositions that cannot be separated and discussed independently of one another).

These ideas had been poorly understood in the West at the time when Panikkar was writing his book – in the mid 1960s – and he intended to set these mistaken interpretations straight. Panikkar notes that the doctrine of no-ego or *anātman* is wrongly interpreted as a simple negation of the soul; *nirvāna* as the total extinction and complete annihilation of the goal of human beings; the idea of radical dependent co-origination or *pratītyasamutpāda* as a simple exclusion of a transcendent cause; and the Buddha's refusal to answer a set of metaphysical questions, or *avyākritavastūni*, as depicting the Buddha as someone indifferent to philosophical discourse.[20]

In the face of these misconceptions, Panikkar sets about applying his contemplative hermeneutics to the Buddhist texts and advances a "constructive" reading of them in order to let the original spirit of the Buddha's philosophy shine forth. His hermeneutical exercise and reflections constitute the core chapters of *El Silencio del Dios*.

17. Panikkar, *SG*, 17.
18. Panikkar, *SG*, 17–19. Panikkar notes that he cites the passage on the "Four Noble Truths and Eightfold Path" from the *Samyutta-nikāya* in full not only because of its capital importance for Buddhism as such, but also because of its essential pertinence to the "atheism" of the Buddha (p. 19).
19. Panikkar, *SG*, 20.
20. Panikkar, *SG*, 25.

(i) *Nairātmyavāda* (or *anātman*):[21] The Self as a Non-Substantial Entity

According to Panikkar, by his doctrine of *anātman*, which asserts that there is no substantial ātman or everlasting soul, the Buddha intends to affirm that the "self" is in a dynamic becoming and a constant flux. As such, a self *qua* soul (ātman) cannot be grasped objectively as a changeless substance.[22] Moreover, Panikkar notes that by denying the substantial ātman, the Buddha is not saying that there is "no ātman." He explains this point as follows:

> [The Buddha] espouses neither *sāśvatavāda* (eternalism) nor *ucchedavāda* (nihilism). There is no ātman, to be sure. But neither *is* there an *anātman*. . . . The Buddha's intuition is one of pure contingency. It is the discovery of *the absence of an ultimate subject of operation*. It is the primary experience of transiency, and of the pain inherent in all beings. By "there is no ātman," the Buddha means that *there is nothing that could be the ultimate object or primary subject of human experience*, nothing to be posited as the ultimate, definitive fundament of everything else.[23]

(ii) *Nirvāna*:[24] Liberation from Negation

By *nirvāna* Panikkar understands the state that is free of suffering (*duhkha*), in which all negative causes of suffering will have been eliminated. As mentioned above, the teaching of Four Noble Truths and Eightfold Path is aimed at diminishing and eventually eradicating suffering and pain (*duhkha*). Panikkar observes:

> Nirvāna means the extinction of existence considered as negative and contingent. . . . Nirvāna is the cessation of all *samskāras*.[25] It is the dissolution of all bonds. It is the extinction of thirst. It is the annihilation of the *three cardinal vices*. . . . In a word, nirvana can be summed up as holiness (*arhatva*).[26]

Further elaborations of what the "three cardinal vices", also called the "three poisons," mean are: (a) incessant thirst or craving for things both existent and non-existent, (b) uncontrolled greed or avarice, and (c)

21. Panikkar turns to *Samyutta-nikāya*, 3.66, 4.54, *Dīgha-nikāya*, 2.64ff., *Milinda pañha*, 2.1.1ff., 3.5.6, and *Visuddhi-magga*, 18, for textual support on this notion.
22. Panikkar, *SG*, 28.
23. Panikkar, *SG*, 28. Emphasis added.
24. For a textual support, he turns to *Visuddhi-magga*, 16, *Milinda pañha*, 3.5.10, *Itivuttaka*, 4.3, *Udāna*, 8.1, *Itivattaka*, 44, as well as the Mahayana scriptures, including the *Madhyamikakarika*, 25.1–24, the *Lankavatara Sutra*, 12, and an episode from the *Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch* of Chan.
25. *Samskāras* refer to past impressions, subliminal impressions.
26. Panikkar, *SG*, 38. Emphasis added.

stupidity, *i.e.* jealousy, bigotry, nagging, and constant grumbling from general dissatisfaction with one's life's circumstances. Buddhists must assiduously practice to diminish and eventually void these negative sentiments, thoughts, and attachments. Nirvāna is a state free of any trace of these "three poisons" that infect our mind.

Nirvāna understood in this sense is very much akin to what Panikkar speaks of as "blessed simplicity" or "new innocence." Moreover, nirvāna is not some goal "after which one strives" or "at which one arrives." Rather, it is the recognition or awareness that nowhere else but in the midst of this very imperfect life (*samsāra*) blessedness (*nirvāna*) is found. Nāgārjuna speaks of it in terms of "samsāra is nirvāna; nirvāna is samsāra."[27] Panikkar calls such awareness "mystical," and concludes his contemplation on nirvāna with these words: "A mystical temperament will have no difficulty in admitting nirvāna in a positive term."[28]

(iii) *Pratītyasamutpāda*:[29] Universal Concatenation of All Things

Traditionally the notion of *pratītyasamutpāda* is considered to form the core of Buddha's insight. Simply put, it teaches: "whatever comes into existence goes out of existence, because everything comes into existence because of mutually dependent causation." Today, we are much more familiar with this kind of worldview of the networking of things thanks to ecological awareness. We know that the health of our planet and what we human beings do to it are all causally interlinked. The Buddha's insight is radical and penetrating. Indeed, he develops a "phenomenology" of consciousness according to which consciousness arises only in being conditioned by other than itself.[30] As Panikkar puts it, there is no pure eternal consciousness; rather, "*pure* contingency" is all that there is.[31] Radical relativity puts the uncritical importance of one's ego into question and dismantles its seemingly substantial reality. No *cogito* is spared from this dynamic arising and disappearance of everything.

Instead of settling on the defeatist and pessimistic view that "all things must pass; nothing is forever," Panikkar finds in this pure contingency the very gateway to salvation. Liberation is possible precisely because of

27. Panikkar, *SG*, 40.
28. Panikkar, *SG*, 41.
29. For textual support, Panikkar turns to the *Majjhima-nikāya*, 2.32, *Dīgha-nikāya*, 2.55, *Samyutta-nikāta*, 2.92, *Visuddhi-magga*, 17, and *Anguttara-nikāya*, 3.60.
30. *Majjhima-nikāya*, 1.256ff. Quoted in Panikkar, *SG*, 58: "Consciousness is not independent, but comes about through the chain of causation."
31. Panikkar, *SG*, 54.

this radical contingency of all things. The elimination of the substantial notion of the self leads one to the alleviation of suffering. This insight is at the heart of the Buddha's message, as Panikkar explains:

> The discovery of pure contingency is a devastating experience, for it leaves no escape in the form of some "projected" transcendence. It is the acceptance of ontological death. It is the affirmation of the negative. It is an experience that arises after having crossed the threshold of utter desperation. . . . But the very fact of having discovered the irremediable contingency, finitude, mortality, and final nothingness of human beings and the world around them, and to have accepted the inexorability of it all, is salvation – the discovery that leads to the most complete emptiness. And the name for this is *nirvana*.[32]

Panikkar further observes that "for the Buddha, *pratītyasamutpāda* represents a middle way, the 'midway teaching' that avoids both extremes [of] being and nonbeing."[33] It is because "things 'are' only insofar as they are produced and conditioned by other things, and no more."[34] Nonbeing is dynamically intertwined with being and constantly at play. Conscious recognition of this reality leads one to salvation. Thus Panikkar concludes: "Phenomenal reality is perfectly true – only it is transitory and mortal. Strictly speaking, nirvana 'is' not. There 'is' no nirvana. And so when one asks what nirvana 'is,' the only answer is *silence*."[35] Here, we see that the insight into the reality of *pratītyasamutpāda* is "the cause" of the Buddha's silence, but we are already ahead of our discussion.

(iv) *Avyākritavastūni*:[36] The Inseparable Knotty Questions and "The Parable of the Poisonous Arrow"

The choice of this fourth notion of *avyākritavastūni* as the key concept is quintessential Panikkar. In fact, his sustained meditation on this idea seems to have given rise to the very title of his book, *El Silencio del*

32. Panikkar, *SG*, 56.

33. Panikkar, *SG*, 57. For instance, to affirm that there is "self" is an "eternalist" (*sāśvatavāda*) position; to negate it would be an "annihilationist" (*ucchedavāda*) position, and again to affirm it would be not in accordance with "the knowledge that all things are impermanent." Panikkar, *SG*, 56–57.

34. Panikkar, *SG*, 57.

35. Panikkar, *SG*, 57. Emphasis added.

36. Panikkar refers to "particularly pregnant texts" on this problem of inexpressibility and the meaning of "silence," namely, the famous parable of "the man wounded by an arrow" in *Majjima-nikāya*, Sutta 63, *Samyutta-nikāya*, 44, as well as a short extract from the *Vimalakirti-nirdesha Sūtra*, ch. 9.

Dios. Referring to "things (*vastūni*) that are not extricated or unraveled (*avyākrita*)," this classical idea alludes to the Buddha's refusal to engage in metaphysical debate because the human condition requires immediate attention and response, not the wasting of energy on abstract debate. The Buddha remained silent before the fourteen metaphysical propositions, which traditionally have been summarized as follows:

Propositions A:
(1) the world is eternal, or
(2) the world is not eternal, or
(3) the world is both eternal and not eternal, or
(4) the world is neither eternal nor not eternal.
Propositions B:
(1) the world is spatially finite, or
(2) the world is not finite, or
(3) the world is both finite and not finite, or
(4) the world is neither finite nor not finite.
Propositions C:
(1) the body and the soul (*jiva*) are identical, or
(2) the body and the soul are not identical.
Propositions D:
(1) the Tathāgata (perfected person) exists after death, or
(2) the Tathāgata does not exist after death, or
(3) the Tathāgata both exists and does not exist after death, or
(4) the Tathāgata neither exists nor not exists after death.[37]

First, let me point out here that these questions represent the kinds of problems typically pondered by the ancient Indian religionists and are by no means unique to Buddhism. Furthermore, these propositions are couched in the longer sermon of "the Parable of the Poisonous Arrow."[38] The parable goes as follows: A man was shot by an arrow thickly smeared with poison. People run to him to save him, and a doctor is summoned. Suppose, this man who was shot by an arrow were to insist to the doctor: "I will not have the arrow taken out of my body until I know who shot the arrow; whether this person is a large man or a small man; whether this person is dark in complexion or fair; if the bow this person used is a longbow or not; if the bowstring was made of a plant material or animal material; if the feather of this arrow was a falcon or a hawk. . . . Until I

37. See Panikkar, *SG*, 61.
38. Although this parable is omitted from the text quoted by Panikkar. See Panikkar, *SG*, 71, but the expression, "the poisonous arrow" is mentioned at several places in the book.

know the answer to these questions, I will not have the arrow pulled out of my body." The Buddha says, if this man were to go on in this fashion, "he would long be dead before he has an answer."[39]

The most obvious thing would be for the doctor to remove the arrow and treat the wounded man. That is the Buddha's answer given by way of silence. For he knows that regardless of his answers to the metaphysical propositions, the reality of human life marked by birth, old age, sickness, and death remains, and so does the reality of the human mind being tormented by sorrow, lamentation, misery, grief, and despair. All that the Buddha is concerned with here is to *show* the way to stop the pain. The Buddha's goal is not to propound a theoretical worldview but to lay out the path of practice that leads to the liberation of humanity from suffering. For that, one must come to grasp the fact that suffering, too, arises out of a cause, and *therefore* by getting rid of this cause, suffering *can cease*. In this way, humanity can realize the state of blessed peace. That is the primary concern of the Buddha.

Silence as Logical Deconstruction

Panikkar next moves to a detailed analysis of the fourteen propositions. He believes that he is close to unraveling how the August Teacher may have dealt with these questions himself, and why only silence would do as the "answer."

To carry out this task, Panikkar first groups these fourteen propositions into four types of logical statements: (1) A is B, (2) A is not B, (3) A is and is not B, and (4) A is not (is-and-is-not) B.[40] He entertains under the second type of proposition two possible readings: namely, A is-not B (an ontological indeterminacy of the subject A), and A is not-B (a logical difference between A and B). It is in the "ontological fissure" of A is-not B that Panikkar finds the way to attain "our liberation from ontolatry [worship of being]."[41]

Anticipating critical reactions from his Western colleagues trained in logic, Panikkar cautions that "what the Buddha *is not doing is to deny the logical principles of identity and non-contradiction*; [rather] the Buddha transcends any affirmation or negation that would rely on the logical principles exclusively."[42] Also, we need to be clear on the meaning of the word, *avyākritavastūni,* which does not mean "unfathomability of truths," but rather that "things (*vastūni*) cannot be separated or untangled (*avyākrita*) from one another."[43] Panikkar goes on to say:

39. *Majjhima-nikāya*, Sutta 63.
40. Panikkar, *SG*, 63–64. This formulation is Nāgārjuna's classical "tetralemma."
41. Panikkar, *SG*, 64.
42. Panikkar, *SG*, 69. Emphasis added.
43. Panikkar, *SG*, 69.

> It seems to me that the intentionality of the *avyākrita* does not regard the logic of thought – *does not bear upon a softening of the principle of non-contradiction or of the excluded third*, but rather points to the imperfection, the limitation, the inability to express the real – intrinsic first of all to the verb "to be" and then to the very concept of being. . . . There are actually propositions that are inexpressible, *owing to the limited grasp of the ontological comprehension available to us*. Accordingly, although there is no third alternative between A and not-A, there is between "is" and "is not."[44]

Here, we touch on Panikkar's guiding insight, namely, the "mystery" of subject A (subjectivity) – that the ontological reality of a subject cannot be objectivized. As such, the subject eludes logical formulations. Subject A retains its inner reality that cannot be totally exhausted by one predicate or another. Panikkar approaches the notion of *avyākritavastūni* both logically and ontologically, with the aim to free the mind from the mental habit of accepting the Parmenidian one-to-one correspondence of thinking and being.[45] Panikkar observes:

> Our propositions tell us merely that *A is* B. But this does not exhaust the identity of A. Therefore, there is room for "A *is-not* B," precisely because it is on account of an "A is- not B" that "A is not-B" likewise fails to exhaust the identity of A. The formulations 3 ["A is and is not B"] and 4 ["A is not (is-and-is-not) B"] are invoked so that the Buddha and his disciples will see themselves to be constrained to deny that even one of *these* two propositions ["A is B," and "A is not B"] contains the truth.[46]

To put it plainly, since A (the subject) is "impermanent, changeable, and contingent," and, as such, A is "neither is nor is not," and therefore cannot be self-same and spoken of with reference to B or not-B.[47] Panikkar concludes this section of logical analysis with this following observation:

> At bottom the Buddhist intuition is single. Everything falls together: *anātmavāda*, impermanence, radical momentariness, universal concatenation and dependency, inexpressibility, *nirvāna*, and silence.[48]

44. Panikkar, *SG*, 70. Emphasis added.
45. Panikkar, *SG*, 64.
46. Panikkar, *SG*, 70.
47. Panikkar, *SG*, 70.
48. Panikkar, *SG*, 70. English translation slightly modified.

Silence, the Answer of the Buddha

What were Panikkar's "great insights into the famous silence of the Buddha" that he intimated in his letter to Castelli? They certainly seem to be related to his reflections on *avyākritavastūni*, and the priority of concrete life over logical formulations. On this point Panikkar writes:

> The Buddha utters neither negation nor affirmation. If he denied one proposition, he would be implicitly affirming its contradictory and vice versa. The Buddha simply refuses to allow himself to be drawn into the game of mere dialectics, and therefore unambiguously rejects the affirmation of a doctrine, its negation, and finally the affirmation and negation of both. Hence his silence. The gentle, smiling Buddha does not refuse to speak, but . . . he surely refuses to answer.[49]

This is how Panikkar understood the Buddha's silence on the logical plane. To summarize why the Buddha remained "silent," I gather from Panikkar's texts three points.

First, the reality of beings is always in a flux; a subject is not an objectifiable substance out there, nor is there a disinterested subject as an observer over here. To quote Panikkar: "*The 'is' has neither subject nor predicate.* Things *are* insofar as they pass, decline, and end, insofar as they proceed-and-cease to 'be' in order to continue to be. *To be is to pass through existence.*"[50] A logical explanation cannot capture the living reality of dynamic becoming and decaying that beings are.

Second, propositional statements already presuppose the parameters of the universe, while vital reality cannot be "contained" and limited by the questions. Or, as the Buddha exclaimed, "O Rādha, this question cannot set its own boundaries."[51]

Third, a metaphysical answer will not save "a man shot by a poisonous arrow." Remaining merely on the discursive level takes us away from the existential, psychological, biological, physiological, and other vital realities of being. To continue to speculate on the "ultimate question" will only be an idle occupation, which "does not profit, has nothing to do with the fundamentals of religion"[52] – to paraphrase the Buddha.

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49. Panikkar, *SG*, 62.
50. Panikkar, *SG*, 105. Emphasis added.
51. Panikkar, *SG*, 152. *Samyutta-nikāya*, 3.6.
52. Panikkar, *SG*, 71.

Mystical Insights into Silence: Via Negativa and Ontological Apophaticism

Panikkar was an intellectual trailblazer who created his own "road" as he proceeded in his philosophical inquiry. One hears here an echo of his favorite poem, *Caminante*, by Antonio Machado:

> Wayfarer, your footsteps are
> the way, and nothing more;
> Wayfarer, there is no way,
> you make the way while you go.[53]

In approaching the Buddha's thought, Panikkar realizes that the Christian mystical tradition of *via negativa* (apophatic theology) offers him helpful hermeneutical insights. He sees an affinity between the notion of *anonadamiento* of the Spanish mystics and the Buddhist notion of *nirvana*. Hence, he observes: "A mystical temperament will have no difficulty in admitting the thesis of the positivity of nirvana, whereas a nonmystical one will be able to accept only the nihilistic thesis."[54] Concerning his approach to Buddhist *nirvāna* via mystical insights, Panikkar explains:

> We can be sure that *nirvana* means the extinction of existence considered as negative and contingent. It will be the "going out" of temporality, death, and all that is mortal – of that can (still) be born. . . . The human being's end must be the pure negation of negativity itself – the *a-nonada-miento* . . . of Spanish mysticism, the destruction of that nothing, that *nonada*, which one "is."[55]

It is interesting to observe that the word *anonadamiento* is not easily rendered into good English, but the original Spanish text helps us see that for Panikkar it means the destruction of that very nothingness that we are.

In his analysis of Buddhist ideas, Panikkar makes use of the terms "apophatic" and "apophaticism" from mysticism.[56] What Panikkar means by "the apophatic insight" has nothing to do with "anti-intellectual" or "supra-intellectual" attitude,[57] nor is it an "epistemological apophaticism," which merely posits:

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53. Antonio Machado's poem "Caminante" was Panikkar's favorite. The English translation is by Panikkar, *RB*, 12.
54. Panikkar, *SG*, 41; this passage is mentioned earlier, see footnote 24, above.
55. Panikkar, *SG*, 38; compare the Spanish text, *El Silencio del Dios*, p. 74.
56. Panikkar, *SG*, 13.
57. Panikkar, *SG*, 13–14.

> that the ultimate reality is ineffable, that human intelligence is incapable of grasping, of embracing it, although this ultimate reality itself may be represented as intelligible, even supremely intelligible in itself (*in se*). A gnoseological apophaticism comports an ineffability on the part of the ultimate reality only to us (*quoad nos*).[58]

Over against this "epistemological apophaticism, which by the way betrays one's pious attitude to presume "[the divine] reality is beyond human comprehension," Panikkar advances an "ontological apophaticism," which refers to the ultimate reality as actually "empty." This is a bold and striking move for a Christian thinker. This is where the deeper reason for the silence of the Buddha resides, as he writes: "It seems to me that the ultimate reason for the silence of the Buddha resides precisely in the fact that this ultimate reality *is* not."[59] Panikkar calls the Buddhist type of apophaticism "ontic apophaticism"[60] or "ontological apophaticism."[61] In this context, the Buddha's silence makes another point, namely, that it quiets the busy mind of humanity:

> The Buddha makes no reply because he eliminates the question. It is not that he does not respond to what is asked. Rather, strictly speaking, nothing is actually asked. The Buddha silences our anxieties – the human thirst to know to go, to get there. . . . The Buddha would have us humble.[62]

I submit that this philosophical silence about God is the kind of silence that has inspired Panikkar to write *The Silence of God*. Panikkar explains his point as follows:

> As for God, the Buddha holds his tongue. . . . By his silence the Enlightened One has shared with us a glimmer of his insight that ultimately there is "nothing" to be said about God because God "is" precisely this "nothing." In other words the divine silence simply corresponds to the divine absence of being.[63]

But this is only the starting point of Panikkar's reflection. Sustained by his contemplation, he ponders further:

58. Panikkar, *SG*, 14.
59. Panikkar, *SG*, 14.
60. Panikkar, *SG*, 14.
61. Panikkar, *SG*, 102.
62. Panikkar, *SG*, 148.
63. Panikkar, *SG*, 167–68.

> The silence that the Buddha wishes for his disciples is not a philosophical silence, but a *mystical attitude, an interior experience*. The Buddha's silence is not a defeat but a victory. He refuses to delve into the ātman, or to attempt to define *nirvāna*. He will not answer the fourteen basic questions that appear as so vital to the satisfaction of the intellect. The only philosophical argument into which he allows himself to be drawn is that of the impermanency of all that exists, not excluding humankind.
>
> But God, too, is silent. Indeed it is precisely this that the Buddha has wished to "tell" us. What falls within our form of thinking is being, and we have seen what difficulties derive from the identification of God with Being. *God is the very absence of being*. God is God for creatures alone: *in se* God is nothing at all, least of all God.[64]

Panikkar's apophatic reflections developed in his *El Silencio del Dios* was the beginning of his attempt "to liberate the divine from the burden of being God" – the task he set out in his Gifford Lectures.[65]

Panikkar now moves to the next stage of his philosophical inquiry that comprises the task of (a) de-divinizing Being and (b) de-ontologizing God.[66] Through this investigation he concludes that the problem of theism is actually a "pseudo problem."[67] To dissociate God and being (or Being) comes as a breakthrough in Panikkar's philosophical thinking. On this point, we read Panikkar's last and most mature phase of philosophizing in *The Rhythm of Being*. Here, concerning the debate of God and Being he writes:

> Once we become aware of the shaky ground on which it [*i.e.* the debate] stands or falls, we discover it as a pseudo problem. . . . *[T]he problem of the Divine is centered not on theism but on the very nature of reality as a whole*, and that theocentrism is as inadequate as anthropocentrism, or for that matter cosmocentrism. The question of the Deity is not a specific theological, anthropological, or cosmological question. It concerns the very nature of the real.[68]

64. Panikkar, *SG*, 171. Emphasis added.
65. S. Eastham, "Introduction," in Panikkar, *CE*, xi.
66. Panikkar, *SG*, ch. 9 is dedicated to this problem.
67. Panikkar, *RB*, 154.
68. Panikkar, *RB*, 154. Emphasis added.

And again:

> We cannot go back to ancient traditions which for a multiplicity of reasons have lost hold of present-day humanity. Yet we must connect with them and make a giant stride across modernity . . . *Religions themselves are in dire need of "conversion."* This *metanoia* is something more, not less, than repentance and change of mind; it demands *an overcoming of the mental – without denying it*.[69]

We see here how Panikkar's inquiry into *The Silence of God* led him to a radically apophatic expression of the traditional notion of theism. As a result, he talks about the triune dimensions of reality, in terms of the divine, the human, and the cosmos working in unison. This "theanthropocosmic intuition," which refers to the interpenetration and mutual implication of *theos*, *anthropos*, and *kosmos,* is Panikkar's answer to the "silence of God."[70]

Conclusion

The reason why Panikkar became interested in Buddhism was closely linked to his concerns with contemporary secularism and atheism. To him it became progressively clear that "the traditional *homo religiosus*" – both theistic and nontheistic – "must come to terms with the *homo saecularis*."[71] In this challenge, he found in Buddhism a way to dissociate "salvation" from "theism" and to open up an alternative spiritual path different from the ones rooted in traditional theism or monotheism. In his words: "Buddhism has eliminated God from the way of salvation, radically transforming the conception of the ultimate. Could modern atheism perhaps take its cue here?"[72]

Panikkar recognized in the heartbeat of secularism an emerging spirituality, to which he gave the name of "sacred secularity." For him it signals a new stage of human consciousness, and, as such, it is not a mere reaction or negation of traditional theism, but something very real and genuine. His theanthropocosmic vision of reality is formulated in his direct engagement with atheistic and secular expressions of spirituality. Perhaps not surprisingly, this Trinitarian vision is already present in *The Silence of God*. The following passage reads very much like the later Panikkar:

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69. Panikkar, *RB*, 156. Emphasis added.
70. "Theanthropocosmic" is synonymous with more popularly adopted "cosmotheandric." I prefer the former to the latter, as it avoids the "androcentric," *i.e.* male-centric, connotation.
71. Panikkar, "Introduction," *SG*, xix–xx.
72. Panikkar, *SG*, 100.

> The heart and essence of what until now has been called atheism . . . is not . . . a kind of reaction against a series of tenuous propositions upon the existence of a Supreme Being. It is not a kind of corrective for theism. It represents, rather, *a new stage along the journey of humanity, a new degree of awareness*. . . . Neither monism nor dualism – neither pantheism nor atheism, nor theism – corresponds to the profound experience that persons of our time seek to express. *The world, humankind, and God* are . . . intertwined. A world without human beings is without meaning; a God without creatures would cease to be God; humankind without a world would be unable to subsist and without God would not be truly human.[73]

Panikkar pushes for the radical reinterpretation and reintegration of the past wisdom in the face of the present-day spiritual challenge, for he sees such an integration to be crucial for the "survival of being."

The year 1989 turned out to be a significant year in Panikkar's career, as the long-awaited English translation of *El Silencio del Dios* was finally published; in that same year, he delivered the prestigious Gifford Lectures at the University of Edinburgh, from 25 April to 12 May. In the Introduction to the English translation of *The Silence of God*, Panikkar candidly talks about his life and path of inquiry – intellectual, existential, and spiritual – and admits that this book is a kind of "auto-bio-graphy." By autobiography, Panikkar means more than his own life story; it is a writing (*graphia*) of a man (*autos*) born and lived in twentieth-century Europe, North America, and India, and reflects certain cultural and spiritual values (*bios*). In this sense, his "auto-bio-graphy" is tantamount to "a writing of the life of humankind."[74] What makes his statement characteristically Panikkar is the next line: "Therefore I speak of God."[75]

To close, through this present study of Panikkar and Buddhism, I came to see that Panikkar "left" as a Christian, "found" Christianity to be one religion among religions, and "returned," having radically liberated the divine from the theistic yoke, without having ceased to maintain his "Christianness." To my own query, "what kind of Christian did Panikkar remain?" I would answer that he distilled the heart of Christian spirituality into "Christianness," which "emphasizes one's personal spiritual life." As

73. Panikkar, *SG*, 96–97. Emphasis added. Also see the Spanish original, *El Silencio del Dios*, 156.
74. This is his summary of the intent of his approach behind these three terms of "*autos*," "*bios*," and "*graphia*." Panikkar, "Introduction," in *SG,* xxvi.
75. Panikkar, *SG*, xxvi.

such, "some may even prefer to avoid the name 'Christian.'"[76] Moreover, towards the end of his life, Panikkar was developing the notion of what he calls "*ishtadevatā* spirituality."[77] "*Ishtadevatā* is a sort of incarnation of the divine. It is in a certain way that real divine symbol with whom we may have a personal relationship," explains Panikkar.[78] Christ, as the "*ishtadevatā*," "chose" Panikkar as a concrete, intimate, and personal manifestation of the divine. Panikkar carried in his heart the Christ, whose compassion and company he sought until his final hours.

76. Panikkar, "*Trisangam*: Jordan, Tiber, and Ganges," in *A Dwelling Place for Wisdom*, Annemarie S. Kidder, trans. (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 151–52.
77. Panikkar, *RB*, 363–64.
78. Panikkar, *RB*, 364.