

Adieu Raimon, A Dieu

Raimon Panikkar, known to many in this society of Hindu-Christian Studies as a teacher, scholar, mentor, or friend, died at his home in Tavertet, near Barcelona, on August 26, 2010. He was ninety-one and had been in poor health for some time, but he did live to see the day when his Gifford Lectures, originally delivered in Edinburgh in 1989, and over which he had agonized ever since [he produced some nineteen different versions of parts of the texts], finally saw the light of day in June of this year as *The Rhythm of Being* (Orbis Books).

Panikkar taught and lived in the United States from 1966-1987 and was known to generations of students here and around the world through both his lectures and his many books. What they heard and read were the arresting reflections of a multi-dimensional person, who was simultaneously a philosopher, theologian, mystic, priest and poet.

It was also that combination of personae that made him at times difficult to understand. He was a formidable scholar with doctorates in philosophy, theology, and chemistry and an acquaintance with the worlds of learning and religious reflection in more than a dozen languages. But at heart he was a mystic and a contemplative, who chose at the end of his academic career in 1987 to live in the small mountain village of Tavertet (population 75) in a remote part of the Pyrenees north of Barcelona. Even there he was not easily accessible because he would shut off his phone for half the week. The prayer and meditation room in his house was right next to his study, and he would drift imperceptibly between the two spaces both literally and in consciousness. He once wrote

“Writing, to me, is meditation—that is medicine—and also moderation, order for this world. Writing, to me, is intellectual life and then in turn is spiritual existence. The climax of life is, in my opinion, to participate in the life of the universe, in both the cosmic and divine symphonies to which even we mortals are invited. It is not only a matter of living but also of letting life be—this life, offered to us as a gift so that we may sustain and deepen it.” (*A Dwelling Place for Wisdom*, 79)

He was born the son of an Indian Hindu father and a Spanish Catholic mother on November 3, 1918. He received a conventional Catholic education at a Jesuit high school in Barcelona before launching on his university studies in the natural sciences, philosophy, and theology, first in Barcelona and then in Madrid. Shortly thereafter, the Spanish Civil War broke out, and Panikkar was able to take advantage of his status as the son of a father who was a British citizen to go to the University of Bonn in Germany to continue his studies. When World War II started in 1939, Panikkar returned to Spain and completed the first of his three doctorates, this one in philosophy, at the University of Madrid in 1946.

In late 1954 when he was already 36 Panikkar visited India, the land of his father, for the first time. It proved to be a watershed, a decisive reorientation of his interests and of his theology. He had entered a dramatically new world, religious and cultural, from the Catholic Europe of his youth. The transformation was aided by his meetings and close friendship with three monks, who like him were attempting to live and to incarnate the Christian life in Indian,

predominantly Hindu and Buddhist, forms: Jules Monchanin (1895-1957), Henri Le Saux, also known as Swami Abhishiktananda (1910-1973), and Bede Griffiths, the English Benedictine monk (1906-1993). All four of them, in different ways, discovered and cherished the riches and the deep spiritual wisdom of the Indic traditions, and attempted to live out and express their core Christian convictions in Hindu and Buddhist forms. To some extent this multiple belonging was made possible by their embrace of *Advaita*, the Indic idea of non-dualism, which sees the deep, often hidden, connections between traditions without in any way minimizing the differences between them.

One of Panikkar's many striking sentences looking back on his life's journey asserts: "I left Europe (for India) as a Christian, I discovered I was a Hindu and returned as a Buddhist without ever having ceased to be a Christian." A wealth of meaning lies in that assertion. Christianity in its historical evolution began as a Jewish tradition and then spread to the Greco-Roman world, acquiring along the way Greek and Roman cultural expressions which have given it a certain form and character. Panikkar, having grown up and having been trained in a traditional Catholic and neo-Thomist environment, had a profound knowledge of, and respect for, that tradition. This knowledge prepared him for discussions with some of the great minds of twentieth-century Catholicism: Jean Danielou, Yves Congar, Hans Urs von Balthazar, and others. He was also invited to take part in the Synod of Rome and the Second Vatican Council. But Panikkar did not confuse or conflate historical contingency with spiritual truth. In Hinduism and Buddhism Panikkar found other languages, in addition to Biblical Hebrew, Greek philosophy, and Latin Christianity, to express the core convictions (the *kerygma*) of the Christian tradition.

That was the main thesis of *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*, which Panikkar originally presented as a doctoral thesis to the Lateran University in Rome in 1961, based as it was on a close textual comparison between Thomas Aquinas and Sankara's interpretation of a canonical Hindu scripture, the *Brahma-Sutras*. Christ and his teaching are not, so Panikkar argues, the monopoly or exclusive property of Christianity seen as a historical religion. Rather, Christ is the universal symbol of divine-human unity, the human face of God. Christianity approaches Christ in a particular and unique way, informed by its own history and spiritual evolution. But Christ vastly transcends Christianity. Panikkar calls the name "Christ" the "Supername," in line with St. Paul's "name above every name" (Phil 2:9), because it is a name that can and must assume other names, like Rama or Krishna or Ishvara.

This theological insight was crucial for Panikkar because it provided the basis of the inter-religious dialogue that he and Abhishiktananda and Bede Griffiths were both advocating and practicing themselves. Far from diluting or in any way watering down core Christian beliefs and practices, such dialogue, in addition to fostering inter-religious understanding and harmony, provided an indispensable medium for deepening the Christian faith. Such dialogue provides an insight and entry point into other, non-Christian names and manifestations of Christ. This was particularly important for Panikkar because together with other Asian theologians he saw how historical Christianity had attempted, especially during its colonial periods, to convert Christ into an imperial God, with a license to conquer and triumph over other Gods. This for Panikkar is **the challenge** of the post-colonial period inaugurated in the mid-to-late twentieth century and continuing into our present and the future. In his words, "To the third Christian millennium is

reserved the task of overcoming a tribal Christology by a Christophany which allows Christians to see the work of Christ everywhere, without assuming that they have a better grasp or a monopoly of that Mystery, which has been revealed to them in a unique way.”

Needless-to-say, such striking ideas carefully and rigorously argued and dramatically expressed got the attention of religious thinkers and secular institutions around the world. Panikkar was invited to teach in Rome and then at Harvard (1966-1971) and the University of California, Santa Barbara (1971-1987). He was now, as Leonard Swidler, occupant of the Chair of Catholic Thought at Temple University, called him, “the apostle of inter-faith dialogue and inter-cultural understanding.”

In true apostolic fashion, he traveled tirelessly around the world, lecturing, writing, preaching, and conducting retreats. His famous Easter service in his Santa Barbara days would attract visitors from all corners of the globe. Well before dawn they would climb up the mountain near his home in Montecito, meditate quietly in the darkness once they reached the top, and then salute the sun as it arose over the horizon. Panikkar would bless the elements—air, earth, water, and fire—and all the surrounding forms of life—plant, animal, and human—and then celebrate Mass and the Eucharist. It was a profound “cosmotheandric” celebration with the human, cosmic, and divine dimensions of life being affirmed, revered, and brought into a deep harmony. The celebration after the formal service at Panikkar’s home resembled in some respects the feast of Pentecost as described in the New Testament, where peoples of many tongues engaged in animated conversation.

At the center of these celebrations, retreats, and lectures stood Panikkar himself and his arresting personality. People who heard or encountered him could not help but be struck by this physically small man who in his earlier days was like a cluster of fireworks exploding in an array of shapes and colors. Here is what the great Mexico poet Octavio Paz, who was his country’s ambassador to India from 1962-1968, had to say about him:

It is impossible not to recall a Catalan Hindu, both a theologian and a migratory bird in all climates from Benares to Santa Barbara, California: Raimundo Panikkar. A man of electric intelligence, with whom I would spend hours discussing some controversial point in the *Gita* or Buddhist sutra—I have never heard anyone attack the heresy of Buddhism with such furious dialectics as Panikkar (*In Light of India* 209).¹

In later life, his persona managed to combine the dignity of a sage, the profundity of a scholar, the depth of a contemplative, and the warmth and charm of a friend in his effervescent personality. An Australian friend of his, Dr. Meath Conlan, mentions having dinner with him at his home when the phone rang. It was the Pope calling from the Vatican, seeking Panikkar’s advice on how best to handle the aftermath caused by his ill-advised remarks about the Prophet Mohammed in his Regensburg Address of 2006.

He is well known to readers of this journal as a great scholar of both the Hindu and Christian traditions and the dialogue between them. The 940 page translation and commentary

of the Vedas and the Upanishads, published as *The Vedic Experience: Mantramajari*, is a sensitive hermeneutical study that attempts to bring the ancient Vedic world alive as a resource for contemporary celebration. Likewise, his account of Hindu myths in *Myth, Faith, and Hermeneutics* tries to bring out their deeper cross-cultural philosophical resonance.

Critics, of course, charged him with proffering a Christian interpretation of Hinduism to which his wry response often was that he had a Hindu interpretation of Christianity. The point for Panikkar as a thinker was to move beyond labels and the conventional ideas they carried to deeper spiritual truth. Indeed, one of the main purposes of inter-religious dialogue for Panikkar is the intra-religious dialogue it should spark and the discovery of often hidden treasures in one's own tradition.

Perhaps the most daring of Panikkar's attempts at charting a Hindu-Buddhist-Christian spirituality within a still Christian self-understanding came in his early and path-breaking little book first published in 1970 as *The Trinity and World Religions*. Here he imposed a Trinitarian structure on Hinduism and an advaitic structure on Christianity, both "trinity" and "advaita" being alternative symbols for the cosmotheandric Mystery. Drawing on traditional and unacknowledged, submerged dimensions of the Christian trinity, Panikkar attempted to connect Buddhism with the silent, self-emptying dimension of the Father; Christianity, Judaism and Islam, as religions of the word, with the Son, the incarnate Word; and advaitic Hinduism with the immanent, radically inner dimension of the Spirit. In doing so it was not his purpose imperialistically to provide a Christian grid onto which other traditions could be forced. Rather, taking Christianity as his point of departure, he wanted to show that Christianity has no monopoly on Trinitarian understanding and that such understanding enriched by the contributions of different traditions can in fact deepen and transform all of them.

It is important, however, to balance this account of Panikkar as thinker with the stress he placed on living an authentic life. "My aspiration," he would often say, "does not consist so much in defending my truth, but rather in living it out." As one of his students speaking for many put it, "He integrated intellect, commitment, and practice in a very important and inspirational way for so many of us. Many of our lives and paths have benefitted from his touch."

To cite just one example of that commitment, in September 1994 at the age of 76 Panikkar made a pilgrimage of almost a month to Mount Kailash. He had a weak heart, and the doctors were against it, but Panikkar was determined. Anyone who has been on such a pilgrimage can vouch for its hazards—there are no resources for rescue and hardly any medical amenities. It was in part a fulfillment of a promise to his Hindu, Saivite father. As Panikkar wrote after the expedition

I have always been more inclined to the spiritual pilgrimage. And yet that memory of a hindu father telling his teen-age son about Kailasa reverberated in him when the occasion arose to join the last batch of sadhus the Chinese would allow in 1959. He had then to renounce by virtue of 'holy' (christian) obedience, and later on due to other reasons, not the least his heart not supporting high altitudes.

By an inexplicable synchronicity of events he found himself this time almost led to undertake the pilgrimage which for him was likely to be not only ultimate but final (*Concilium* 226, pp.48-54, 1996)

Sixteen years later, Panikkar did indeed embark on a pilgrimage both ultimate and final. May God and the gods grant him rest in the Great Source which he sought with such intensity and single-mindedness during his earthly sojourn.²

Endnotes

¹ . In the absence of a record of their conversations, it is difficult to know what Paz meant by “the heresy of Buddhism.” Certainly, anyone familiar with Panikkar and his extensive writings on Buddhism would know about his deep regard for it. I suspect that Paz, knowing the history of Buddhism in India, was being ironic.

² . It is worth mentioning that for years Panikkar had a house in Hanumanghat in Varanasi overlooking the Ganges. In his will he specified that half his ashes should be immersed in the Ganges, a river he loved. The other half of his ashes has been bequeathed to his family.

Joseph Prabhu
Philosophy Department
California State University, Los Angeles
September 21, 2010

¹ . In the absence of a record of their conversations, it is difficult to know what Paz meant by “the heresy of Buddhism.” Certainly, anyone familiar with Panikkar and his extensive writings on Buddhism would know about his deep regard for it. I suspect that Paz, knowing the history of Buddhism in India, was being ironic.

² . It is worth mentioning that for years Panikkar had a house in Hanumanghat in Varanasi overlooking the Ganges. In his will he specified that half his ashes should be immersed in the Ganges, a river he loved. The other half of his ashes has been bequeathed to his family.