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# At the Limits: Raimundo Panikkar's Long Theological Journey

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James L. Fredericks

## At the Limits

### RAIMUNDO PANIKKAR'S LONG THEOLOGICAL JOURNEY

Raimundo Panikkar died at his home near Barcelona on August 21. He was ninety-one. Panikkar lived and taught at the University of California, Santa Barbara, for almost twenty years, but he was known throughout the world as an erudite and original philosopher and theologian. Will we see the likes of Panikkar anytime soon? The way we answer this question reveals a good deal about what we think of our present time. Panikkar is often placed in a firmament that includes Thomas Berry, Ewert Cousins, and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin—heralds of a new era in human history, a new axial age or “new story.” I am skeptical about such grand claims. All the same, these thinkers were responding to the end of the colonial system and the rise of what is broadly called globalization. At the very least, Panikkar, like Thomas Berry, saw the significance of Vatican II’s *Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (Nostra aetate)*, and saw far beyond it as well.

Panikkar was born in Barcelona in 1918, the son of an Indian father and a Spanish mother. He received a conventional Catholic education with the Jesuits before starting university studies in chemistry, philosophy, and theology. The Spanish Civil War forced him to continue his studies in Germany. The outbreak of the Second World War brought him back to Spain. Eventually, he completed three doctorates: in natural science, philosophy, and theology. Panikkar did not make his way to India, his father’s homeland, until 1954, at age thirty-six. India brought about a decisive reorientation of his interests. During his stay on the subcontinent, he befriended three Christian monks who were trying to incarnate their Christian faith within a Hindu culture: Jules Monchanin, Henri Le Saux (also known as Swami Abhishiktananda), and Bede Griffiths, an English Benedictine. Reflecting on this passage to India, he said, “I left Europe as a Christian, I discovered I was a Hindu and returned as a Buddhist without ever having ceased to be a Christian.”

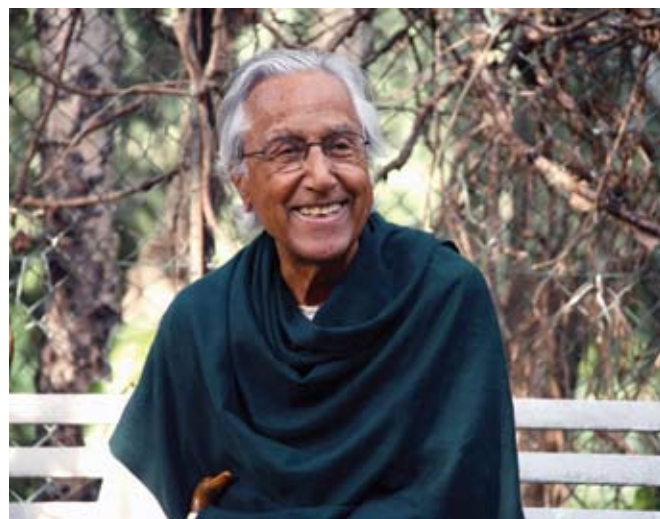
His career as a scholar brought him to Rome and Harvard and eventually to Santa Barbara. Along the way Panikkar wrote books in six languages and was proficient in six more ancient languages. Deciding which of his books are most important is perilous to say the least. There are roughly forty of them. Jaca Books in Italy is bringing out his collected works in some thirty volumes. Continuum Books is planning an English edition.

Certainly one of his best known early books is *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*, a work that started as a doctoral thesis at the Lateran University. Panikkar compares the Hindu thinker Shankara with Thomas Aquinas. He claims that, if Christ is seen as the symbol of the unity of the divine and the human in Christianity, then Christians must recognize that they have

no monopoly on Christ. Other religions have Christ as well. In other words, Christ is but a Christian word for a universal religious reality: the nexus of the divine and the human. Colonial Christianity may have converted Christ into a tribal deity, but Christ transcends Christianity. In Christianity’s third millennium, Christian believers must disabuse themselves of the view that they have a monopoly on the mystery and open themselves to a “christophany” in which Christ will be seen in other religions. Perhaps Panikkar’s most controversial claim is that while Jesus is the Christ, the Christ cannot be associated with Jesus only.

After *The Unknown Christ*, Panikkar gradually developed his notion of the “cosmotheandric principle.” This neologism (he was *very* fond of neologisms) denotes the perfect indwelling of the divine, the human, and creation. All of reality is permeated with vestiges of this trinity. The cosmotheandric is the original unity of all as well as the most fundamental consciousness. In this way, Panikkar called into question the Enlightenment’s legacy of scientific objectivism, Christian theology’s attachment to Greek notions of substance, and any attempt to divide the sacred from the secular. Christ is the symbolization of the cosmotheandric.

Along the way, Panikkar had useful things to say about pluralism. In Panikkar’s writing, pluralism does not mean the transcendent unity of all religions as asserted by the so-called pluralist school of the theology of religions. For Panikkar, pluralism is an attitude, not a metaphysics. Pluralism is an awareness of the irreducibility and incommensurateness of the various religious, philosophical, and cultural systems and the non-necessity of reducing reality to just one system. There is no super-system that can account for all of reality. Nor does there need to be one.



Raimundo Panikkar

## Consider the Day

(Mt 6:34)

Consider the day,  
how it begins where  
time listens—

and lilies gather light  
only, skystartled calls  
in first wing rising  
and sunlit branches at eversong  
lively, free for beginning—

Tomorrow is not at ever  
but close, perhaps the next throw of the stone,  
all passage afoot and ready  
as endings—

—Judy Little

This understanding of pluralism has several implications. First, Panikkar is able to say that no particular system can claim hegemony over any other system. The European Enlightenment's claim to objectivity can no longer stand. Second, "theoretical pluralism" is not allowed. There is no system that transcends and unites all the systems. There may be an elephant and six blind men, but that is all. There is no one who can see the whole elephant and tell the six blind men that their opinions are only partial. Pluralism is a praxis that cannot be reduced to a theory. Once pluralism becomes a system, it becomes a means of domination. Third, Panikkar can claim that relativity is not the same as relativism. He was fond of noting that we all look at the world through our own windows. The cleaner our window, the more likely we are to think we are not looking through a window. Pluralism means that everybody looks through a window. It does not mean, however, that any window is as good as any other. Some may be better than others. Last, Panikkar argues that pluralism is an attitude that requires interreligious dialogue. This dialogue is grounded in the hope that mutual learning is possible. Furthermore, he is not queasy about the possibility that, as a result of dialogue, we may come to conclusions about which windows are more smudged than others.

Panikkar certainly had his critics. He was humble about his shortcomings as well. Seventeen years after the publication of *The Unknown Christ*, he published a revised edition. Some critics argue that his view of pluralism is merely a philosophical crutch for an era frightened by the failure of the nation-state system and the rise of religion as an identity marker. Panikkar, in other words, is trying to make a virtue of a necessity. To this charge, Panikkar retorts that virtues, however necessary

they might be, are also good. Pluralism, after all, would not have been possible during the heyday of the Enlightenment, European colonialism, and triumphalist Christianity. Neither would it have been possible for Catholics before *Nostra aetate*. For all his scope, Panikkar did not engage East Asian Buddhism or Islam in any depth. His focus was India and the West. I also must say that Panikkar could be quite a showman. He certainly was charming in his Indian attire and shock of gray hair (I saw him in action one evening over a splendid dinner in Los Angeles—all he ate was an hors d'oeuvre). His erudition, however, was no show.

Panikkar did not like talking about two subjects. As a young man in Spain, serious about religious ideas and the spiritual life, he became a friend of the charismatic Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer, who urged him to become a priest. Panikkar was ordained in 1946 and was associated with Opus Dei for some twenty years. This association ended with the coming of the Second Vatican Council. When asked about this time in his life, Panikkar had little to say beyond the claim that he did not regret it. The other topic Panikkar did not like talking about was his marriage. As I understand the matter, Panikkar entered into a civil ceremony when he was seventy. The identity of his wife is not known to me. If the couple lived together at all, the time was brief. Panikkar never stopped functioning as a priest. In fact, he claimed that the marriage was his way of protesting mandatory celibacy. (Panikkar's sister is said to have noted that there were better ways to protest celibacy.) Eventually his relationship with the church was regularized by the bishop of the Diocese of Varanasi. Panikkar's marriage sheds very little light on his intellectual achievements. His association with Opus Dei, on the other hand, allows us to appreciate what a long intellectual journey this thinker made in his ninety-one years of life.

Panikkar's last book, *The Rhythm of Being*, comes with an affecting backstory. The book has been called Panikkar's most mature work. I look on it as a summation of his thought. The backstory is that the book was largely finished some twenty years ago. The book is based on his Gifford lectures given in 1989–90. After expanding on the lectures considerably, he delayed in publishing the manuscript. Why the delay? Perhaps a hint is to be found in the book's brief epilogue. Panikkar reports that he was unable to write the last chapter, which was to have the title "The Survival of Being." As his death approached, he decided to publish the manuscript without the final chapter. In the epilogue, he confesses that in the excitement of the lectures he imagined that he could tackle a subject that, in the end, proved to be beyond the powers of his intellect. "I have touched the limits of my understanding and must stop here," he writes. Then, in a way that reveals much about himself, he adds, "How can human thinking grasp the destiny of life itself, when we are not its owners?" ■

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