Culture, Peace, Dialogue: Raimon Panikkar’s *Philosophia Pacis*

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**Abstract:** The paper explores Raimon Panikkar’s *philosophia pacis* (“Philosophy of Peace”). It is based on his notion of “cosmic confidence” in reality as the very foundation for peace. The approach favours what is often
called “non-dualistic thinking”—or the mystical apprehension of reality. From this perspective, peace is not a concept, let alone an ideology, but what Panikkar calls a “living myth” with profoundly spiritual as well as political connotations. The argument is made that a global culture of peace is only possible on the basis of intercultural and interreligious dialogue.

**Introduction**

One of the great fruits of interreligious dialogue is the realisation that so much of what is claimed to be religious is, in reality, cultural. The Jewish people, for one, have always understood this. Christians, and other religions in a majority situation, have tended to forget the cultural roots of their religious beliefs and practices to the point of identifying religious orthodoxy with specific cultural forms. The Catholic church only came to recognise this at the time of the Second Vatican Council when it turned its attention to cultural forms and spoke first of the need to ‘adapt’ the Christian Gospel to particular cultures, and then moved to speak of the necessity of ‘inculturation’. Even if this experiment was soon criticised in some circles, the flood-gates had been opened. Questions were being asked: “Does one need to be spiritually semitic and intellectually western in order to be Christian?”

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Christianity owes its foundational identity to its Semitic and Greek heritage. Catholicism in particular also drew much from the Roman imperial tradition which was, of course, significantly challenged by the Reformation churches. Ecumenical and interreligious dialogue have gone some way towards recognising how cultural influences were (and unfortunately continue to be) so much at the centre of interreligious suspicion – leading, at times, to violence and even warfare.

Yet another approach to this question of culture and its significance for interreligious dialogue is the realisation that cultures and religions are not primarily, or in their essences, ideologies. They are myths. Evidently, I do not mean ‘myth’ in the rationalistic sense of ‘untrue’, but in the much more dynamic sense of providing a sense of reality and existential meaning to our lives. Faith, whether in religious or secular terms, is mythic.² It is expressed in stories, legends and rituals as well as intellectual constructs. But the essence of religion or culture transcends the realms of the intellect and its partner, dualistic thinking. Here, the argument is that we need intercultural and interreligious dialogue if we are to pierce the confinement of narrow logics and dualistic thinking. Only in this way will we be able to create a global culture of peace not just

² See Raimon Panikkar’s definition of a “living myth” and his account of “faith as myth” in his *Myth, Faith and Hermeneutics* (New York: St Paul’s, 1979), 4 & 213-218.
Despite – but through the very celebration of – cultural and religious diversity.

My aim is to explore a relatively unique approach to the human, moral and spiritual foundations of peace in the writings of intercultural and interreligious scholar Raimon Panikkar (1918–2010). As we will see, for Panikkar, peace is not a concept, let alone an ideology, but a “living myth” and even what he calls “the most unifying universal symbol” of our times. As such, peace has profoundly spiritual as well as political connotations. In relation to global peace, what is needed, in Panikkar’s view, is not ‘military disarmament’ (even if this remains important) but what he calls ‘cultural disarmament’.

The approach highlights the importance of intercultural and interreligious dialogue as the catalyst for cultural and spiritual transformation if we are, in the words of John Lennon, to “give peace a chance”. In Panikkar’s terms, reconciliation through dialogue is the only means by which a new order of peace, justice and harmony can be established.

Panikkar’s approach highlights a non-dual (or a-dual) approach to ultimate questions, an approach that he specifically relates to the Hindu Vedantic doctrine of advaita (literally neither two

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4 See Panikkar, “Cultural Disarmament as Peace’s Requirement” in Cultural Disarmament, 61-103.

5 John Lennon’s “Give Peace a Chance” was written in Montreal, Canada, and released as a single on Apple Records in 1969.

6 See his “Pathways to Peace” in Cultural Disarmament, 93-103.
nor one). This is not to eschew the importance of rational thought or dialectics. Jesus himself spoke in dualistic terms: “We cannot serve both God and wealth” (Matt. 6:24). However, he goes well beyond dialectics in his Sermon on the Mount where the either/or approach to reality is thrown on its head. Life is not entirely made up of black and white, but also includes many shades of grey as well as a multitude of other colours. Christian theology of the Trinity as well as the Hindu *advaita* are clear examples of where rational thought is incapable of grasping the mystery of ultimate reality. Moreover, according to Panikkar, the Trinity is not the privilege of the Godhead, but the character of the entire reality—divine, human and cosmic.\(^8\) If we view the human person in dualistic terms of mind and body, or intellect and will, we will find ourselves ignoring the dimensions of spirit, life-force and emotion. If our focus is on the hypostatic union of Christ as human and divine, and we forget that Christ is equally the mystery at the heart of all creation, our theology is also likely to be truncated.\(^9\)

There are many areas of life that require non-dualistic thinking. One can think of love, suffering, death, God, the after-life and

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\(^8\) Panikkar uses the term ‘cosmotheandric’ (cosmic-divine-human) to describe this three-in-oneness of all things, of which humanity is not just a ‘part’ but an integral ‘participant’. See his *The Cosmotheandric Experience* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1993), esp. 54-77.

\(^9\) This is a common critique of much Christian theological thought. See, for example, Kevin Treston, *Emergence for Life Not Fall from Grace* (Preston, Vic.: Mosaic Press, 2013).
sex as key examples. Panikkar speaks of needing to see with the “third eye” which is the mystical apprehension of reality. Such apprehension enables one to ‘see’ things in non-dualistic ways:

Reality does not need to be totally intelligible in itself. . . Reality is not reducible to one single principle. The single principle could only be an intelligible principle. But reality is not mind alone, or cit, or consciousness, or spirit. Reality is also sat and ananda, also matter and freedom, joy and being. . . . Reality is not transparent to itself. It does not allow for a perfect reflection. Reality is also spontaneity, an ever new creation, an expanding energy. Being or reality transcends thinking. It can expand, jump, surprise itself. Freedom is the divine aspect of being. Being speaks to us; this is a fundamental religious experience consecrated by many a tradition. And to hear ‘being’ is more than to think it. . . The ultimate religious intuitions are jumps in the being of ‘being’. Deductive thinking is of no avail here. We are dealing with spontaneity, with a ‘being’ that is still being and has not simply been.

When it comes to dialogue with another, especially when dealing with radically diverse cultural or religious worldviews, Panikkar speaks of the need for a “human cosmic trust” or “cosmic confidence” in reality itself. Ultimately, as Panikkar sees it, “for a truly cross-cultural religious understanding, we

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10 Richard Rohr covers these and other aspects of nonduality in his The Naked Now: Learning to See as Mystics See (New York: Crossroad, 2009).


need a new revelatory experience”.\textsuperscript{13} He sees the creation of a global culture of peace in such ‘mystical’ terms.

**Nine Sutras on Peace**

Panikkar presents what he calls his “Philosophy of Peace” (*philosophia pacis*) in nine sutras which clearly demonstrate a multi-dimensional and interdisciplinary approach.\textsuperscript{14} While each sutra contains its own innate logic and claim to truth, Panikkar stresses their dynamic interrelationship so that only together do they constitute the “gift of peace”.\textsuperscript{15} There is, of course, such a thing as political peace; but genuine peace is something altogether different to the mere absence of war and conflict. Moreover, in the situation in which we find ourselves at this juncture of human history, merely political answers are grossly insufficient. Political peace itself requires religious transformation.\textsuperscript{16} This is not a matter of confounding politics with religion, something that has occurred too often in the past as in our own time. The two need to be thought through together in context of intercultural and interfaith dialogue. This is a central tenet of Panikkar’s hermeneutics of peace

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\textsuperscript{13} Panikkar, "Some Words instead of a Response" in *Cross-Currents* 29:2 (Summer, 1979), 195.
\textsuperscript{14} *Cultural Disarmament*, 15-23.
\textsuperscript{15} *Cultural Disarmament*, 8-12.
\textsuperscript{16} *Cultural Disarmament*, 43-60.
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enshrined in his nine sutras. In what follows, I provide a brief descriptive account of and commentary on each of the sutras.

**1. Peace is participation in the harmony of the rhythm of being.**

This may be interpreted as the call to non-violence, provided we understand non-violence as the active respect for the profound dignity of all being, and not merely as the absence of resistance, force or power. In a world where natural rhythms are so accentuated by our technocratic and technological culture, we move increasingly towards social upheaval, psychic unhealth and ecological destruction. The challenge is not to deny or repress these limitations of our fast-changing world with its ecological, economic, and political symptoms of violence and disharmony, but to disarm them through personal, social and cosmic transformation. Panikkar calls this the “adventure of being” which is neither a linear process to some pre-ordained evolutionary future, nor a return to some mythical, imaginary past, but an acceptance of the rhythmic

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17 *Cultural Disarmament*, 15f.
18 For Panikkar’s analysis of the effects of technology, and what he calls “technocratic civilization”, on the rhythms of nature and the human psyche, see *Cultural Disarmament*, 83-92; and his *Técnica y tiempo* (Buenos Aires: Columba, 1967).
19 *Cultural Disarmament*, 16.
nature of reality, the very be-coming or rhythm of being in which we are privileged to play a role.20

2. It is difficult to live without outer peace; it is impossible to live without inner peace. Their relationship is nondualistic (advaita).21

We all know that the outer world and the inner world are mutually interpenetrating. How tempting it may be to escape the world of cruelty and violence by heading to a desert or a monastery. While some may be called to live their lives in such relative isolation from the world, no authentic spirituality can be founded on escape from reality. The monk or the hippie represents our universal call to contemplation as a way to inner peace. Yet, for most of us, such contemplation is to be achieved in the context of thoughtful action in the world of commerce, industry, family life and politics. We are called to inner peace at the same time we are asked to confront external sufferings and commit ourselves to the alleviation of unjust situations. In religious or secular terms, the saint is able to live in a world of injustice and violence without losing his/her sense of inner peace. However, most of us, not being saints, will find inner peace difficult to attain without an external world where justice, freedom and peace prevail.

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20 This is the major thesis of Panikkar’s 1989 Gifford Lectures, published as The Rhythm of Being.
21 Cultural Disarmament, 17f.
3. Peace is neither conquered for oneself nor imposed on others. Peace is received, as well as discovered, and created. It is a gift (of the Spirit).  

Whereas we might fight for rights or justice, we don’t fight for peace; we receive it. In Jungian terms, peace is much more a feminine virtue (receptivity) than a masculine one (imposition). However, receptivity does not mean passivity. While peace is received as a gift, we must do something with it: we transform what we receive (as in the Christian reception of the Eucharist). As with the experience of love, we are invited into a new way of being in the world, into a new relationship with the other which requires ongoing discovery and the call to an ever new creation. Peace, like love, requires constant nourishment. In religious terms, peace is a grace—both a divine gift and a human responsibility. This is to say that peace is much more than a human urge, aspiration or desire, let alone a mere program of social or political action. In this sense, to use another religious term, peace is eschatological, something never fully achieved in the here-and-now, yet a gift that promises to break open and transform our current unsatisfactory realities.

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22 Cultural Disarmament, 18.

23 Panikkar specifically states: “Peace is received. We need a ‘feminine’ attitude in order to receive it”. Cultural Disarmament, 7.
4. Victory never leaves to peace.24

We know the rubrics of war: the conquerors, having established their superior powers, enact a peace treaty with the conquered. While in the short or medium term this may lead to a cessation of war, it does not lead to true peace. The vanquished rise again when circumstances allow (e.g. Versailles Peace Treaty post World War I leading, within a generation, to the rise of Nazism and the atrocities of World War II). Even if circumstances do not allow the vanquished to reassert themselves, the so-called peace situation can only be continued by ongoing violence against and suppression of the conquered (e.g. minority ethnic groups). Peace is never achieved through the re-establishment of a shattered order, but only through the establishment of a new order, a new creation. Yet, we ask, must not evil be overcome? Our problem here amounts to deciding who is the arbiter of good and evil? The answer tends to be the one with superior power and the most destructive military weapons. What we tend to forget is that victory is always victory over people who, like ourselves, are a mixture of good and evil. Moreover, even if we establish to our satisfaction that a particular regime needs to be destroyed, can this ever justify the extermination of millions who are already victims of their own regimes? And, since

24 Cultural Disarmament, 18f.
victory does not lead to peace, we are only slowly beginning to learn that another, more radical approach is necessary.

**5. Military disarmament requires cultural disarmament.**

If peace was a technological problem, a technological solution such as military disarmament would be its solution. Indeed, this might be a good place to start even if we all know, in our hearts, it will never happen unless there is a much deeper recognition of the need for a spirituality of peace. Cultural disarmament is concerned with this more profound challenge. It has to do with how cultures interact; how they perceive and live with the other. If the ‘other’ is the enemy, pagan, khafir, heretic or infidel, their elimination is the only viable option. Moreover, if one’s particular culture is armed with both weapons and a sense of cultural, human, moral and/or spiritual superiority, the means for elimination or suppression of the always less-than-human other is assured. Whereas military disarmament overcomes the first obstacle, only a realignment of what constitutes our human-being-together on earth is capable of transforming our misguided, militaristic and competitive worldview. This requires a move towards

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25 Cultural Disarmament, 19ff., 93-103.

26 The works of Emmanuel Levinas are significant in this regard through the prioritization they give to the ‘face-of-the-other’ in life, ethics and dialogue. See Terry Veling, For You Alone: Transcendence and Relationship in the Writings of Emmanuel Levinas (Oregon: Cascade Books, 2014).
intercultural understanding through dialogue and reconciliation. In this process, cultures are disarmed of their deluded sense of their own superiority along with their obsessive fear of the other.

6. **In isolation, no culture, religion, or tradition can resolve the problems of the world**  

Pluralism is the order of the day. Like peace, pluralism is not a concept, utopia or ideology, but a myth. It describes not merely the way things are but, more fundamentally, the way things need to be if we are to ever learn to live together in relative harmony and peace. In political terms, pluralism is simply the recognition there is no single culture, religion or tradition that can resolve the world’s problems, including its most challenging problem of achieving pathways to peace. Even more than this, pluralism recognises our acute dependence on one another for resolving such issues. We need to divest ourselves of all colonial, imperialist and universalist assumptions that inevitably impose their own worldviews (often by force) on weaker parties, thus denying their insights (as well as their dignity). In this regard, we are only now beginning to realise the profound sensibility of Indigenous

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27 Cultural Disarmament, 20f.


29 Panikkar states: “No single human or religious tradition is today self-sufficient and capable of rescuing humanity from its present predicament”. Invisible Harmony, 175.
cultures for the sacredness of the earth, a knowledge we ignore at our peril and even at the expense of the future of planet earth.\textsuperscript{30} Clearly, while western science and technology have their part to play, we also need to learn from other traditions, such as eastern mysticism and the oral traditions, if we are to successfully negotiate a peaceful, earthly future.

\textbf{7. Peace pertains essentially to the order of \textit{mythos}, not to that of \textit{logos}.}\textsuperscript{31}

We might easily dismiss Panikkar’s notion of myth/\textit{mythos} as a return to a pre-rational, even irrational, perception of reality. Surely, reason/\textit{logos} is the overriding principle for the right ordering of our lives. The problem is that reason is the loan shark in the ocean of human perception.\textsuperscript{32} As ‘man cannot live on bread alone’ likewise reason, although essential, is not the only requirement for human life and relationship.\textsuperscript{33} So, when Panikkar refers to God, pluralism or peace as myths, he is not denying their rationality, but invoking a more profound sense of their meaning and significance. Peace, like God, pluralism,

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\textsuperscript{30} See, for example, Gerard Hall and Joan Hendriks, eds., \textit{Dreaming a New Earth: Raimon Panikkar and Indigenous Spiritualities} (Preston, Vic.: Mosaic Press, 2012).
\textsuperscript{31} \textit{Cultural Disarmament}, 21f.
\textsuperscript{32} See Panikkar’s discussion on the limits of rationality in \textit{Invisible Harmony}, 162-167.
\textsuperscript{33} In another context Panikkar stresses that Spirit and Word are both required since: “Word without the Spirit is certainly powerful but barren, and the Spirit without the Word is certainly insightful but impotent”. R. Panikkar, “The Silence of the Word: Non-dualistic Polarities” in \textit{Cross-Currents} 24:2-3 (Fall, 1974): 160.
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civilisation, democracy or freedom, is a concept; but it is not merely a concept. Reduced to concepts, rationality or interpretation, God and peace may/have become reasons for conflict and warfare. There will continue to be rival meanings and interpretations of all such realities. Nonetheless, their mythic appeal is precisely in the ability to transcend ideological, cultural, political and religious systems. This is why, according to Panikkar, “peace is the eminent myth of our days … (or) the unifying myth of our times.”

8. Religion is a way to peace. Religion, once turned into an ideology, ceases to be a way of peace and turns into an excuse for war. History is too full of multiple examples to offer any meaningful objection. Yet, all religions in their own diverse ways claim to be “ways of peace”. Religions can no longer be comfortable with the notion of their being pathways of inner-peace for their followers while being causes of outer wars for others. Again, in their pluralistic expressions, religions claim to be ways of peace for humanity and the entire cosmos. Even the “new atheism” claims to divest humans of their religious irrationalities in order

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34 Cultural Disarmament, 21.
35 Cultural Disarmament, 23.
36 Words signifying ‘peace’ are central to most, if not all, religious traditions, for example: ‘shalom’ (Judaism); ‘shanti’ (Hinduism); ‘salam’ (Islam), ‘ayudha’ (Buddhism), ‘pax Christi’ [peace of Christ] (Christianity).
to achieve peace on earth (if not in heaven). Consequently, today’s challenge to all religions is to return to their origins and reclaim their fundamental identities as ‘revolutionary’ pathways to peace through confronting human greed and overturning injustice in all its malevolent forms.  

9. **Only forgiveness, reconciliation, and ongoing dialogue lead to peace and shatter the law of karma.**

The way forward is not the way back. Millions have been killed, cultures destroyed, ethnic groups cleansed, enemies eliminated, injustices entrenched. No peace treaty, amount of compensation, degree of punishment, requirement of reparation, or imposition of someone’s justice can condone the violence let alone achieve the desired peace. Human history is too full of what the religious philosopher René Girard terms “the cycle of mimetic violence” through which people turn on the ‘scapegoats’ to divest themselves of their own guilt. For Panikkar, only forgiveness (‘gift for’), reconciliation (‘bringing together again’) and ongoing dialogue (‘depth meeting of persons’)—what he calls “gifts of the Spirit”—are capable of

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37 Naturally, Panikkar does not intend ‘revolutionary’ to be interpreted in military terms, but rather as what he understands to be the essence of religious origins and the call of our own time for “a new revelatory experience”, “new forms of human consciousness”—or nothing less than “a radical *metanoia*, a complete turning of mind, heart and spirit”. *Cosmotheandric Experience*, 46f.

38 *Cultural Disarmament*, 23, 93-103.

piercing the violent circle of retribution (‘shattering the law of karma’), thereby creating the possibility of peace and a “new innocence”.\textsuperscript{40} Here, the legal model of justice is transcended (not denied) through acceptance of guilt, offer of recompense, seeking and granting of forgiveness, and recommitment to a world in which such violence and injustice are never repeated. Justice is not denied; but mercy (which highlights forgiveness) takes the upper hand. Two imperfect but notable attempts to enact this pathway to peace were the South African “Truth and Reconciliation Commission” and the Australian government’s eventual apology to Indigenous people who were forcibly removed from their families. For Panikkar, only genuine reconciliation (which includes forgiveness) arrives at peace; and reconciliation is impossible without dialogue.

\textbf{Conclusion}

The moral foundations of peace are the same foundations that call each of us to live authentic human lives: to accept life as a gift; to enter into relationship with others who, in turn, challenge our narrow, at times, bigoted views; to seek forgiveness for our lack of fidelity to respect the dignity of others; to reach out in reconciliation and forgiveness to those who have treated us with indifference and even disdain; to

\textsuperscript{40} Elsewhere, Panikkar speaks of this “new innocence” as “integral experience”, “cosmotheandric vision” or “transhistorical conscience” which he identifies with an emerging “third kairolological moment of consciousness”. \textit{Cosmotheandric Experience}, 36-53, 120-133.
accept dissention and even conflict as integral to the very processes of life; to treat the earth as sacred, and do what we can to respect the rhythms of the cosmos; to devote ourselves to the ultimate reality, whether we call this God, Gaia, Spirit, Truth, Freedom or other names. To be human is to be “self-transcending” which requires the constant ability to be transformed through our interaction with others in peace-filled if, at times, challenging dialogue. If the religious traditions have much to teach, it is equally true they have much to learn along with all cultures and traditions.

However, one thing is certain: peace will evade us personally and collectively as long as we rely solely on ourselves and fail to embrace the other (person, tradition, religion, culture, ethnicity) as source of knowledge – and even potential friend. Global consciousness is the awareness we need each other if together we are to receive and create something quite new: a global culture of peace. This requires a totally new attitude towards the other whom we need to meet and know at a more profound level. In dialogue with the cultural, ethnic and religious other we are challenged to a new way of being in the world. In Panikkar’s poetic turn of phrase: “The meeting point is neither my house nor the mansion of my neighbour, but the
crossroads outside the walls, where we may eventually decide to put up a tent—for the time being”. 41

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