This final word of interreligious scholar extraordinaire, Raimon Panikkar (1918 – 2010), is the fruit of nine decades of life and reflection on the world’s major religious and cultural traditions. More specifically, it represents the refined (and twenty-year delayed) publication of his 1989 centennial Gifford Lectures at the University of
Edinburgh, originally entitled “Trinity and Atheism: The Dwelling of the Divine in the Contemporary World.” Panikkar began those lectures by alluding to his being “the first Catalan, the first Spaniard, the first Indian, and, with one recent exception from the Middle East, the first Asian” to be invited to deliver these prestigious lectures. He continued to express his task in terms of conveying “something of the wisdom of all those countries and continents” (xxv).

Joseph Prabhu’s insightful foreward locates Panikkar (following Karl Jaspers and Ewert Cousins) as a pioneering thinker at the dawn of a new (Second Axial) Age in which depth-encounter of the world’s religious traditions is already transforming human life, thought and action. Such transformation does not ignore the insights of any tradition but seeks to establish a ground – what Panikkar calls “an emerging myth” – in which there is “mutual fecundation” among all peoples, cultures and traditions. In his Preface, he boldly states: “I would like to draw on the human experience of roughly the last six thousand years, allowing the wisdom of historical Man to crystallize in holohedral form so as to offer the opportunity of overcoming (not negating) history, and thus entering a new phase in the very life of reality” (xxvi).

The Rhythm of Being is itself a metaphor in which ‘being’ and ‘becoming’ are given equal prominence in his approach to the “open-ended character and unpredictable unfolding” of reality. Panikkar has a penchant for marrying poetic insight (the realm of symbol) with philosophical reflection (the realm of concept). Hence, the notion of rhythm connects to the earth’s seasons, music, dance, social organization, harmony of the universe and what he sees as the very rhythm of/in Being itself. This opens out into the ancient notion of
creatio continua endorsed by contemporary process philosophies and theologies. Classical religious insights – notably the Trinity (Christian), advaita (Vedanta Hindu) pratityasamutpada (Buddhism) – also provide rich symbols of ultimate reality which promote unity, difference, communion, radical relativity, harmony and interdependence among all traditions, old and new.

The Rhythm of Being is perhaps best read as comprising two parts, Chapters 1 – IV and Chapters V – VIII. In the first four chapters, the emphasis is on descriptive analysis and philosophical critique in which the question of Being / Becoming is addressed and possible answers reviewed. I / Introduction: Panikkar outlines his fundamental aim and method as well as introducing the book’s central concepts of ‘rhythm,’ ‘being’ and ‘trinity.’ II / The Destiny of Being focuses on the relationship between ‘being’ and ‘becoming’ according to creatio continua. III / Ancient Answers combines an analysis of various forms of ‘theism’ (‘atheism,’ ‘agnosticism’ and ‘skepticism’ are included) along with a substantial critique of monotheism. IV / The Dwelling of the Divine is concerned with the problematic ‘monism’ versus ‘dualism’ debate, and seeks to find more common ground between transcendence and immanence, philosophy and theology, logos and pneuma. This relates to what Panikkar calls our need for mysticism: indeed, as he said in a prior work, “only the mystic will survive” [The Cosmotheandric Experience, 1993].

What I am calling the book’s second part (Chapters V – VIII) begins with Panikkar’s statement: “Until now I have been descriptive and critical. From here on I shall be offering my own experience of the Divine Mystery ...” (212). V The Triadic Myth discusses Panikkar’s notions of advaita and trinity as a way of overturning the limitations of
monism and dualism. For this, we need to see with the “third eye.” VI / The Theanthropocosmic Invariant argues that a ‘trinitarian’ or ‘cosmotheandric’ vision of reality is a cross-cultural universal symbol. Chapter VII / The Divine Dimension suggests that the ‘divine’ is not an object of human thought, but the depth-dimension to everything that is, signifying mystery, freedom, love and infinite possibility. Clearly, for Panikkar, the divine dimension may be expressed in both theistic and non-theistic (indeed atheistic) terms. Chapter VIII / The Emerging Mythos identifies the emergence of the new cosmology/kosmology – or “cosmotheandric vision” – which takes us beyond the bounds of the monotheistic and scientific paradigms.

Clearly, for regular Panikkar readers, The Rhythm of Being is a reformulation, refinement and extension of his earlier writings. Once again, we see Panikkar attempting to formulate a basis in human experience and spirituality for an authentic pluralism which embraces the world’s religious and cultural traditions, from the most ancient to the most modern. Newer readers may struggle with his language and tendency to create new words, but should persevere in the knowledge of his extraordinary scholarship and vast knowledge of the world’s religions. Evidently, he focuses on the meeting-point between Christianity and traditions of the East, especially Hinduism and Buddhism. Yet, he is also highly conversant with many other traditions including the scientific and humanistic traditions that have their own contribution to make to the intercultural and interreligious challenges of our time.

Any reader will be left with many questions regarding his “cosmotheandric vision.” How does his “radical Trinity” and critique of monotheism square with orthodox Christian (let alone Jewish of
Muslim) belief? How does it effectively deal with atheistic critiques of religion or with atheism itself? Is he really presenting a way through to a new level of consciousness in the adventure of Being, or is he superimposing some grand narrative that fails to account for the individuality of particular traditions? Panikkar is well aware of such questions which he addresses with new insight and vigour.

What the reader of *The Rhythm of Being* needs to realise is that Panikkar is not presenting some new ideology or belief-system. Rather, through the power of symbol, he calls on us to embrace an experience in which the spiritual riches, intellectual depths and cosmic sensibilities of all the world’s traditions can be brought together in an harmonious symbiosis. At the conclusion of the study, Panikkar expresses it this way:

> Summing up: a new *mythos* may be emerging. Signs are everywhere. I have already given many names to fragments of this dawning: cosmotheandric insight, sacred secularity, kosmology, ontonomy, radical trinity, interdependence, radical relativity, and so on. I may also use a consecrated name: *advaita*, which is the equivalent of the radical Trinity. Everything is related to everything but without monistic identity and dualistic separation. I have tried to spell it out throughout these pages. (404)

Originally, this book had an additional chapter entitled *The Survival of Being*. The author finally decided that a systematic eschatological reflection eluded him. As he modestly states in the Epilogue: “I have touched the limits of my understanding and must stop here. The Tree of Knowledge again and again tempt one at the cost of neglecting the more important tree, the Tree of Life” (405).
This is a book that stretches and, at times, strains the imagination precisely because it seeks not only to diagnose the fundamental issues of our age, but to proffer a way forward. It is not a work of comparative religion (surveying belief-systems from the outside), but one of interreligious and intercultural engagement that invites believers of all traditions to depth their own faith in the Divine Mystery through mutual encounter. While this is not solely or even primarily an intellectual challenge, its articulation is nowhere better expressed than in this masterful collation based on the lifetime of a scholar uniquely placed to call us to new forms of being together in dialogue and action. As Panikkar suggests, the rhythm and destiny of Being depend on it.

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