Raimon Panikkar's Intercultural and Interreligious Hermeneutics

Gerard V. Hall, Australian Catholic University
Francis D’Sa S.J. is one of the finest exponents of Raimon Panikkar’s cosmotheandric vision of reality because, like Panikkar himself, Francis D’Sa lives deeply from within his own cultural (Indian) and religious (Christian) traditions while embodying a profound openness to the divine mystery present within all peoples, traditions and the earth itself. He lives this “dialogical dialogue” in his own person (existentially), through the depth of his understanding (intellectually), and by the humanity and humility that draw him to search for wisdom wherever it may be found (sapientially). It is therefore in his honour I dedicate this work.¹

To cross the boundaries of one's culture without realizing that the other may have a radically different approach to reality is today no longer admissible. If still consciously done, it would be philosophically naïve, politically outrageous and religiously sinful.²

For a truly cross-cultural religious understanding we need a new revelatory experience.³

Hermeneutics is the art and science of interpretation, of bringing forth significance, of conveying meaning, of restoring symbols to life and eventually letting new symbols emerge. Hermeneutics is the method of overcoming the distance between a knowing subject and an object to be known, once the two have become estranged.⁴

¹ The original version of this paper was presented at The International Symposium on the Intercultural Philosophy of Raimon Panikkar, Intercultura Centre pel diàleg intercultural de Catalunya, Barcelona, Catalonia, Spain, 21-23rd February 2002, entitled “Intercultural and interreligious hermeneutics: diatopical hermeneutics, dialogical dialogue and homeomorphic equivalence” and published in Catalan as “Hermenèutica intercultural i interreligiosa,” in La filosofia intercultural de Raimon Panikkar, ed. Ignasi Boada (Barcelona: CETC, 2004), 133-152. Francis D’Sa was also a key-note speaker at this conference. See his “La consciència, el temps i la història en l'ombra de Panikkar,” ibid., 67-97.
⁴ Myth, Faith and Hermeneutics, 8.
0. Introduction

If the task of philosophy is to understand reality, and reality is something other than myself or my specific culture or worldview, then philosophy needs to become an intercultural activity. This has not always been the case. If I assume that my culture is singularly gifted with access to truth, the philosophical task is primarily pedagogical and dialectical. However, once it is admitted that the other who does not share my cultural worldview is an original source of human understanding, traditional philosophy is called upon to unmask its pretensions of universal understanding. The same is true for theology. In the new situation of religious pluralism, theological hermeneutics needs to become an interreligious activity based on dialogical strategies. Raimon Panikkar's challenge to the philosophers and theologians of our time is precisely one of raising to consciousness the theoretical and practical importance of intercultural and interreligious hermeneutics.

In order to meet this challenge, Panikkar introduces his three pivotal ideas of diatopical hermeneutics, dialogical dialogue and homeomorphic equivalence. The aim of this paper is to explore their meaning and significance in terms of their contribution to providing a method for interreligious and intercultural encounter. In this task, I am fully aware of Panikkar's own suspicion of method when he states that "a known method can only achieve known results." Method is too often associated with the western-scientific approach which Panikkar wishes to critique as the only valid means for understanding reality. Nonetheless, the

---

5 Of course, there is always a place for a confessional theology understood as theological exploration within a single tradition. Nonetheless, even here, intercultural and interreligious perspectives can no longer be ignored. This is also made abundantly evident in Francis D'Sa, “Sharing the good news in interaction with cultures”, address to International Association of Catholic Missiologists, Pieniezno, Poland, 2007.
corpus of Panikkar's work does suggest a variety of understandings and strategies that are necessary for the validity of interreligious and intercultural hermeneutics.

1. Diatopical Hermeneutics

*Diatopical hermeneutics stands for the thematic consideration of understanding the other without assuming that the other has the same basic self-understanding as I have. The ultimate human horizon, and not only differing contexts, is at stake here.*

Hermeneutics, as the art or science of interpretation, has its origins in the reading of sacred texts. However, we may also apply hermeneutics to the reading and understanding of any texts, persons, cultures, religions or events. Taking Augustine's question—"what do I love when I love my God?"—hermeneutics asks what do I know when I know another reality outside myself? It was Heidegger who suggested we can only come to know something if we first have some degree of pre-understanding. This he called the hermeneutic circle. For the most part, western hermeneutical philosophy has focussed on mono-cultural understanding when some degree of pre-understanding can in fact be presumed. However, in an interreligious or intercultural context such pre-understanding that gives rise to the hermeneutic circle may well not exist. Hence, Panikkar's question: "how can we understand something that does not belong to our circle?" Classical hermeneutical theory is unable to answer this question.

---

8 "What is Comparative Philosophy Comparing?" 130.
This gives rise to the need for diatopical hermeneutics, literally, the art of coming to understanding "across places" (dia-topoi) or traditions which do not share common patterns of understanding and intelligibility. This type of hermeneutics is distinguished from "morphological" and "diachronical" hermeneutics: the first operates within a single tradition, epitomized in the transmission of a culture's meanings and values (morphe = forms) to the young; the second also operates within a single historical tradition in which, however, the gap between interpreter and interpreted has widened "across time" (dia-chronis). In the case of diatopical hermeneutics, the difference to be overcome for understanding to emerge is not the generational or temporal distance within a shared tradition, but the radically different understandings and self-understandings of traditions which do not share common assumptions or basic worldviews born of common historical experience. In fact, diatopical hermeneutics begins with the recognition of the pain of estrangement and radical difference separating cultures and religions.

Stated differently, diatopical hermeneutics arises in response to the challenge of interpreting across cultural and religious boundaries where the hermeneutic circle has yet to be created. In this sense, diatopical hermeneutics is thoroughly postmodern in its refusal to colonize the 'other' with one's own set of religious or cultural presuppositions. However, in contradistinction to some postmodern literature, Panikkar does assume that communication among radically different worldviews is possible—indeed, indispensable. For this to occur, he introduces what he calls the imparative method, "the effort at learning from the other

---

10 "We do not assume here any hermeneutic circle. We create that circle through the existential encounter." "What is Comparative Philosophy Comparing?" 132.
and the attitude of allowing our own convictions to be fecundated by the insights of the other." As distinct from the comparative method, which privileges dialectics and argumentative discourse, the imparative method of diatopical hermeneutics focuses on the praxis of dialogue in the existential encounter. Panikkar is explicit on this point: "it is only in doing, the praxis, that diatopical hermeneutics functions."

In order to appreciate the imparative method of diatopical hermeneutics, it is necessary to be aware of Panikkar's distinctions between mythos, logos and symbol. These foundational categories effectively operate as three distinct yet interrelated means of intersubjective communication and modes of discourse. They are not divisions within consciousness, but distinctive ways in which consciousness understands or engages with the phenomenal world. Panikkar explains with reference to his distinction between mythos and its interpretation (logos):

A living myth does not allow for interpretation because it needs no intermediary. The hermeneutic of a myth is no longer the

---

12 "What is Comparative Philosophy Comparing?" 132-134.
13 Panikkar provides a succinct account of his notions of mythos, logos and symbol in his introduction to Myth, Faith and Hermeneutics, 2-16. David Kreiger suggests that these are equivalent to three modes or "levels of discourse" which he terms boundary (or proclamative) discourse, argumentative (or logical) discourse and disclosive (or symbolic) discourse. The New Universalism: Foundations for a Global Theology (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 62-68.
14 As Roger Rapp states: "Mythos and Logos are not compartments of consciousness or mind. Consciousness has no such divisions. . . . Consciousness is dynamically engaged with the world and there are a limited number of fundamental patterns that consciousness can assume. When symbolically engaged, we can talk about consciousness as Mythos; and when conceptually engaged, we can talk about consciousness as Logos. . . . At its core, consciousness-related-to-world is symbol in action." Private correspondence to author.
myth, but its logos. Myth is precisely the horizon over against which any hermeneutic is possible. Myth is that which we take for granted, that which we do not question; and it is unquestioned because, de facto, it is not seen as questionable. The myth is transparent like the light, and the mythical story—*mythologumenon*—is only the form, the garment in which the myth happens to be expressed, enwrapped, illumined.15

The most important mythical stories are those that tell of a particular tradition's origins. Mircea Eliade viewed cosmogonic myths—stories of tribal origins—as the most significant feature in the identity-formation of primal cultures.16 They are no less important for cultures and religions, ancient and modern, today. What Panikkar adds to this is the view that the very power of myth is founded in its unquestionableness. How then is the myth communicated? The myth may be narrated in story or parable, or otherwise transmitted through symbol and ritual, but the moment we begin to explain or interpret the myth we have already converted it into an object of thought (*logos*). Mythic discourse precedes this subject-object dichotomy and, in so doing, highlights the primacy of experience over interpretation.17 The pervasive power of myth is in its ability to capture the heart rather than the mind which it does by revealing itself from the transcendent horizon of mystery. Every culture and religion has a mythic foundation, a set of taken-for granted truths about reality, which constitutes that tradition's horizon or lifeworld. The meeting of religions and cultures is often an

unsatisfactory experience precisely because there is a clash of myths, each with its own universalist claims.\(^\text{18}\)

When Panikkar speaks of the "myth of pluralism," he is locating pluralism within this mythic realm. "Pluralism," he states, "is indeed a myth in the most rigorous sense: an ever-elusive horizon in which we situate things in order to be conscious of them without ever converting the horizon into an object."\(^\text{19}\) He is the first to agree that pluralism cannot be logically deduced from pure reasoning since, in the meeting of religions and cultures, we often find ourselves confronted with "mutually exclusive and respectively contradictory ultimate systems."\(^\text{20}\)

Because we are dealing with such radically different horizons, languages and worldviews, ordinary interpretative procedures of historical hermeneutics and dialectics are not equal to the task. In this situation, diatopical hermeneutics turns to the symbol as its primary category for truth, meaning and communication. Unlike the *mythos*, which stands behind a community's beliefs in an unquestioning manner, or the *logos*, which subjects its beliefs to the narrow rules of argumentative discourse, the symbol moves between these two worlds of meaning linking subject to object, *mythos* to *logos*, darkness to light, understanding to interpretation, and faith to belief. In Panikkar's words:

> What expresses belief, what carries the dynamism of belief—that conscious passage from *mythos* to *logos*—is not the concept but

\(^{18}\) Universalist claims are especially true of western cultures and the monotheistic religious traditions.

\(^{19}\) Panikkar, "The Myth of Pluralism: The Tower of Babel--A Meditation on Non-Violence," *Cross-Currents* 29:2 (Summer 1979), 203; originally presented as a public lecture for the "Panikkar Symposium" at the University of Santa Barbara in 1977; hereafter, "The Myth of Pluralism." Elsewhere, Panikkar states that "pluralism does not stem from the *logos* but from the *mythos*." *Myth, Faith and Hermeneutics*, 102.

the symbol. Symbol here does not mean an epistemic sign, but an *ontomythical* reality that *is* precisely in the symbolizing. . . . The symbol is neither a merely objective entity in the world (the thing 'over there'), nor is it a purely subjective entity in the mind (in us 'over here'). There is no symbol that is not in and for a subject, and there is equally no symbol without a specific content claiming objectivity. The symbol encompasses and constitutively links the two poles of the real: the object and the subject.\(^{21}\)

In his own definition of hermeneutics, Panikkar focuses on the communicative and redemptive power of symbols. The task of hermeneutics is one of "restoring symbols to life and eventually of letting new symbols emerge." Symbols run the risk of becoming mere signs and, thereby, losing their *ontomythical* power. This occurs when, for example, a religion is reduced to a set of doctrinal beliefs; or when a language becomes, as we say, a "dead language" without a living relationship with a community of speakers. It can also occur when the power of the word is reduced to a mathematical formula or a technical term which is precise in meaning but unable to express a more primordial truth. The poetic word is, for Panikkar, an example of the symbol: it is rooted in the lifeworld of a particular people, place and culture while also being open to transformative, even transcendent, meaning.\(^{22}\) In this sense, the symbol always has more to tell us yet.\(^{23}\) Symbols are both bounded and open. Symbol systems are also at very heart or living cultures and religions.

We have seen that it is only in the praxis that diatopical hermeneutics functions. This is because diatopical hermeneutics is

\(^{21}\) *Myth, Faith and Hermeneutics*, 6f.

\(^{22}\) See, for example, Panikkar's monumental work, *The Vedic Experience: Mantramani* (Pondicherry: All India Book, 1977).

primarily concerned with symbols, and symbols do not exist in the abstract realm of ideas severed from the hearts and minds of those who experience their power for truth and meaning. However, unlike myths which refuse critique—since to critique the myth is to destroy it—symbols are able to take on new and extended meanings in the context of communicative praxis and even ideological challenge. When this occurs, we have what the philosopher Susan Langer calls a "symbolic transformation of experiences" which, she adds, "may illumine questions of life and consciousness, instead of obscuring them as traditional 'scientific methods' have done." 

Symbolic discourse moves between what the mind thinks (logos) and the heart believes (mythos) without being the prisoner of either.

In this context, Panikkar makes a seminal distinction between faith and belief. He has long maintained that faith is a "constitutive human dimension" coterminous with all people, cultures and religions. One does not have faith in doctrines, concepts or other 'things,' but in "the ever inexhaustible mystery, beyond the reach of objective knowledge." Faith is that human dimension that corresponds to myth. In other words, faith is not the privilege of the few but the "primal anthropological act." Not that there is such a thing as "pure faith," since faith is always mediated through symbolic expressions and specific beliefs which embody faith in a particular tradition. However,

24 Susan Langer also states: "Symbolization is the essential act of mind; and mind takes in more than what is commonly called thought. . . . Symbolization is pre-rationative, but not pre-rational. It is the starting point of all intellection in the human sense." Philosophy in a New Key, 3rd ed. (Cambridge & London: Harvard University Press, 1957), 44, 25, 41f.


26 Myth, Faith and Hermeneutics, 6.

27 "Faith cannot be equated with belief, but faith always needs a belief to be faith. Belief is not faith, but it must convey faith. A disembodied faith is not faith." The
authentic, human belief is not represented by the *logos* but by the symbol, that "vehicle by which human consciousness passes from *mythos* to *logos*."\(^{28}\) At a third level, belief is mediated through doctrines, ideologies, rituals and practices. There can be no effective discourse at this third level unless there is a shared symbol system, a commonly held set of beliefs and values that unite believers within a tradition—or across traditions. It is this latter challenge which diatopical hermeneutics squarely faces through its focus on the necessity of symbolic discourse—or what Panikkar also calls "dialogical dialogue."

What needs to be clear at this point is that diatopical hermeneutics, through its focus on the symbolic transformation of experiences, is the very antipathy of the kind of value-free neutrality that is the ideal of scientific and phenomenological methods of understanding associated with dialectical discourse.\(^{29}\) Nor can diatopical hermeneutics be based on prior rules of interpretation since this would be to assume an already-existing hermeneutic circle with its agreed criteria as to what constitutes truth, value and right judgment. Clearly, in cases of intercultural and interreligious understanding, no such hermeneutic circle can be presumed. In this sense, diatopical hermeneutics cannot be universal; its interpretative procedures and rules of engagement must emerge from the dialogue itself.\(^{30}\) How then, and on what basis, does the dialogical dialogue proceed?

**2. Dialogical Dialogue**


\(^{28}\) *Myth, Faith & Hermeneutics*, 5.

\(^{29}\) Panikkar argues that when it comes to interreligious and intercultural understanding, the phenomenological *epoché* procedure is "psychologically impractical, phenomenologically inappropriate, philosophically defective, theologically weak and religiously barren." *The Intra-Religious Dialogue Dialogue*, 76ff.

\(^{30}\) "What is Comparative Philosophy Comparing?" 133.
The method in this third moment [i.e. diatopical hermeneutics] is a peculiar dialogical dialogue, the dia-logos piercing the logos in order to reach that dialogical, translogical realm of the heart (according to most traditions), allowing for the emergence of a myth in which we may commune, and which will ultimately allow understanding (standing under the same horizon of intelligibility).31

Dialogical dialogue begins with the assumption that the other is also an original source of human understanding and that, at some level, persons who enter the dialogue have a capacity to communicate their unique experiences and understandings to each other. In Panikkar's terms, "radical otherness" does not eradicate what he terms "radical relativity" or the primordial interconnection of all human traditions.32 Dialogical dialogue is necessarily a risk or adventure in which participants seek to establish a common ground or circle of meaning in which this primordial sense of human relatedness will be a catalyst for intersubjective communication. It can proceed only on the basis of a certain trust in the "other qua other"—and even a kind of "cosmic confidence" in the unfolding of reality itself.33 But it should not—indeed cannot—assume a single vantage point or higher view outside the traditions themselves. The ground for understanding needs to be created in the space between the traditions through the praxis of dialogue.34

31 Myth, Faith and Hermeneutics, 9.
32 In recent decades, Panikkar had developed the "radical relativity" and interconnection of all religions and cultures with reference to the "cosmotheandric principle" which states: "the divine, the human and the earthly--however we may prefer to call them--are the three irreducible dimensions which constitute the real." The Cosmotheandric Experience (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 60.
33 Panikkar now refers to this as "human cosmic trust" or "cosmotheandric confidence." See his Invisible Harmony (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 174ff.
34 Expanding this notion, Panikkar states: "Dialogical dialogue, which differs from
Although Panikkar develops the notion of dialogical dialogue with more particular focus on interreligious encounter, the fundamental principles can be equally applied to intercultural dialogue. I mention this because he conceives dialogical dialogue in terms of seeking a "new revelatory experience" which may seem to imply an overtly religious connotation. However, for Panikkar, revelation is the uncovering of any living symbol which discloses the 'whole,' connecting us to something 'beyond,' to transcendence or to any ultimate human horizon. As we have seen, faith is a universal human activity that expresses itself in particular beliefs. In turn, these may be explicated in religious or cultural terms—with or without explicit reference to sacred or secular realities. I will return to this question with reference to Panikkar's notion of "homeomorphic equivalence." For the moment, I am claiming only that dialogical dialogue, as Panikkar conceives it, may be applied to both intercultural and interreligious hermeneutics.

The "new revelatory experience" of which Panikkar speaks is the goal of diatopical hermeneutics. Dialogical dialogue is the suggested method for achieving it. This kind of dialogue is first of all distinguished from the dialectical dialogue of argumentative discourse. The dialectical one, stands on the assumption that nobody has access to the universal horizon of human experience, and that only by not postulating the rules of the encounter from a single side can Man proceed towards a deeper and more universal understanding of himself and thus come closer to his own realization."


36 Panikkar's notion of revelation is similar to Paul Ricoeur's "areligious notion of revelation" except that Panikkar does not emphasise Ricoeur's distinction between "truths of faith" and "truths of reason" which accounts for a sharper distinction in Ricoeur between "religious" and "areligious" revelation. See Paul Ricoeur, Essays on Biblical Interpretation (London: SPCK, 1981), 97ff.

37 Panikkar does not see secular and sacred realities in opposition to each other. He proposes the notion of "sacred secularity," the process by which contemporary 'secular' consciousness sacralizes the world, matter, space and time. Worship and Secular Man (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1977).
Dialogue seeks truth by trusting the other, just as dialectics pursues truth by trusting the order of things, the value of reason and weighty arguments. Dialectics is the optimism of reason; dialogue is the optimism of the heart. Dialectics believes it can approach truth by relying on the objective consistency of ideas. Dialogue believes it can advance along the way to truth by relying on the subjective consistency of the dialogical partners. Dialogue does not seek primarily to be duo-logue, a duet of two logoi, which would still be dialectical; but a dia-logos, a piercing of the logos to attain a truth that transcends it. 38

There are certain ground rules or indispensable prerequisites for dialogical dialogue. These include a deep human honesty, intellectual openness and a willingness to forego prejudice in the search for truth while maintaining "profound loyalty towards one's own tradition." 39 In fact, the starting point for dialogical dialogue is the internal or intra-personal dialogue by which one consciously and critically appropriates one's own tradition. Without this deep understanding of and commitment to one's own tradition, there are simply no grounds for the dialogical dialogue to proceed. Second, one needs a deep commitment and desire to understand another tradition which means being open to a new experience of truth since "one cannot really understand the views of another if one does not share them." 40 This is not to assume an uncritical approach to the other tradition so much as a willingness to set

38 Myth, Faith and Hermeneutics, 243.
40 Panikkar, "Verstehen als Überzeugstein," in Neue Anthropologie, H. G. Gadamer and P. Vogler, eds., Philosophische Anthropologie, Vol. 7 (Stuttgart: Thieme, 1975), 137. The practical application of this principle is explained elsewhere by Panikkar with reference to Hindu and Christian understandings of each other: "A Christian will never fully understand Hinduism if he is not, in one way or another, converted to Hinduism. Nor will a Hindu ever fully understand Christianity unless he, in one way or another, becomes a Christian." The Unknown Christ of Hinduism, 43.
aside premature judgments which arise from prejudice and ignorance, the twin enemies of truth and understanding.

The external or inter-personal dialogue will focus on the mutual testimonies of those involved in the dialogue keeping in mind that "what the other bears is not a critique of my ideas but witness to his own experience, which then enters our dialogue, flows with it and awaits a new fecundation." These notions of testimony and witness highlight the fact that dialogical dialogue is primarily the meeting of persons; the aim is "convergence of hearts, not just coalescence of minds." Consequently, it is the experience of existential dialogue itself which is all important. In the encounter, each participant attempts to think in and with the symbols of both traditions so that there is a symbolic transformation of experiences. Both partners are encouraged to "cross over" to the other tradition and then "cross back again" to their own. In so doing, they mutually integrate their testimonies "within a larger horizon, a new myth." This is rightly called a conversion experience. Not only does each begin to understand the other according to the other's self-understanding, but there is growth and dynamism in the manner that each tradition understands itself. Dialogical dialogue challenges once and for all the notion that religions or cultures are closed and unchanging systems.

41 Myth, Faith and Hermeneutics, 244.
42 Invisible Harmony, 173f. Panikkar adds that "there is always place for diversity of opinions and multiplicity of mental schemes of intelligibility."
43 Myth, Faith and Hermeneutics, 244.
44 Growth is a primary category for Panikkar's understanding of religions, cultures and reality itself: "The physical theory of an expanding universe may furnish a fair image of what happens in the ontological realm as well." This translates into the cosmotheandric vision: "In a word, there is real growth in Man, in the World and, I would also add, in God, at least inasmuch as neither immutability nor change are categories of the divine." "Growth in Comparative Religion," in The Intra-Religious Dialogue Dialogue, 98-100.
Inter-personal encounter is always followed by intra-personal
dialogue (or soliloquy) in which the participants seek to integrate their
new experiences and insights into previously held beliefs. Dialogue with
oneself is as important as dialogue with the other. This will also require
the search for a language capable of expressing the "new revelatory
experience" while remaining faithful to the truth of each tradition. In
fact, Panikkar speaks of the need for allowing a "primordial language"
to emerge from the dialogue itself. Such a language is not a "universal
language"; nor can it be artificially created.

The primordial language is hidden in our respective languages
not as a language, of course, but as language. In the effort of
communicating with one another--at the beginning without
proper understanding, then slowly by dispelling false
imagination...
interpretation. It is therefore time to consider Panikkar's third contribution to intercultural philosophy, namely, his notion of homeomorphic equivalence which is the essential feature of all diatopical interpretations.

3. Homeomorphic Equivalence

Homeomorphism does not mean that two notions are analogous, that is, partially the same and partially different, since this implies that both share in a 'tertium quid' that provides the basis for the analogy. Homeomorphism means rather that the notions play equivalent roles, that they occupy homologous spaces within their respective systems. Homeomorphism is perhaps a kind of existential-functional analogy. . . . Homeomorphism is not the same as analogy: it represents a functional equivalence discovered through a topological transformation.47

Despite the radical difference separating religions and cultures, diatopical hermeneutics creates a space of mutuality in which communication and understanding emerge. The method by which this is done is the dialogical dialogue, a particular form of encounter which refuses to treat religious or cultural beliefs as mere signs, seeing them rather as living symbols of a more primordial religious or cultural experience. Diatopical hermeneutics assumes that one is able to enter into and experience the symbolic world of the other and, on the basis of such experience, integrate it into one's own tradition. One learns to think and understand on the basis of the symbol systems of more than one tradition. Symbols, we recall, are both bounded and open. Their interpretation is never exhausted. And yet they are concrete, always tied to a particular world, religion or culture. The question to be asked

is how a person is able to think different symbols together. The notion of homeomorphism is designed to respond to this challenge.

To begin, Panikkar searches for a strategy that comes from the "imparative" versus the "comparative" method. While it may be possible to compare two aspects of thought within a single intellectual horizon--such as western notions of freedom and democracy or eastern ideas of *karma* and duty--, Panikkar claims this is not a valid method for diatopical hermeneutics which needs to interpret across religious and cultural boundaries. This critique is especially directed towards philosophies and theologies that assume their own 'objective' or 'confessional' stance to be the higher viewpoint by which all other systems of thought can be judged. He calls this "intellectual colonialism" which is a "continuation of the western syndrome" with its "thirst for universality." Consequently, diatopical hermeneutics refuses to enter this "deadly game of domination by comparison." Any interpretation must adhere to the golden rule of hermeneutics, namely, that "the interpreted thing can recognize itself in the interpretation." This is nowhere more important than when we seek to interpret the beliefs or symbols of those who live within a different horizon of meaning to our own.

The notion of homeomorphic equivalence is introduced precisely to counter the strategy of making facile comparisons of concepts, beliefs or symbols in one tradition with those of another.

I want to suggest this notion (homeomorphism) as the correlation between points of two different systems so that a point in one system corresponds to a point in the other. The method does not imply that one system is better (logically,

---

48 *Invisible Harmony*, 147ff.
49 "Aporias in the Contemporary Philosophy of Religion," 372.
morally or whatever) than the other, nor that the two points are interchangeable: You cannot, as it were, transplant a point from one system to the other. The method only discovers homeomorphous correlations.\textsuperscript{51}

Homeomorphic equivalence (literally, 'similar forms') suggests there may be a "correlation of functions" between specific beliefs in distinct religions or cultures. If so, the correlation cannot be imposed from outside but needs to be discovered from within through what is called a "topological transformation." This is the method that Panikkar attempts to follow in his work \textit{The Unknown Christ of Hinduism}. Christian belief in Christ and the Vedanta Hindu understanding of Isvara are notably distinct, we might say incomparable. Nonetheless, certain correlations emerge once both Christ and Isvara are interpreted according to their respective functions within their own traditions: Christ's role as the one and only mediator between God and the world is not without meaning for the Vedanta Hindu who would call this Isvara, but understand it differently according to different conceptions of a personal creator God (Yahweh) and the impersonal non-creator Brahman.\textsuperscript{52} For Panikkar, the homeomorphic equivalence of Christ and Isvara keeps alive the differences between the traditions while also permitting points of encounter. The tension between faith and belief translates into the tension between similarity and difference.

In \textit{The Intra-Religious Dialogue}, Panikkar makes a bold assertion that impacts on his conception of homeomorphic or functional equivalence. He states that "each religion represents the whole for that particular group and in a certain way 'is' the religion of the other group only in a different topological form."\textsuperscript{53} Although admitting that such a

\textsuperscript{51} \textit{The Intra-Religious Dialogue Dialogue}, 67.
\textsuperscript{52} See especially, \textit{The Unknown Christ of Hinduism}, 147ff.
view may sound "too optimistic," it provides insight into the basis upon which homologous correlations can be made. Although religions and cultures are profoundly unique, they may represent transformations of a more primordial experience that make each tradition a dimension of the other. If this is the case, then diatopical hermeneutics not only uncovers hidden meanings within another religious or cultural system; it also discovers hidden or repressed meanings within one's own. Panikkar gives the example of the Greek and Christian conceptions of the *logos* which appear conceptually distinct, even contradictory. The former is a semi-divine, created principle of rationality in the universe; the latter, a fully divine, non-created power in the world. However, once these two symbols are thought through together "the former had to offer a certain affinity to the new meaning that would be enhanced once it was assumed."\(^{54}\) In this way, there is a coalescence of symbols within both traditions. Accordingly, the notion of homeomorphic equivalence not only recognizes points of encounter; it equally suggests a process of "mutual fecundation."\(^{55}\) It has an eschatological role to play. Religions and cultures continue to intertwine historically and existentially so that self-understandings and symbols are in a constant process of mutual influence and growth.

In more recent writings, Panikkar has shown how the failure to seek out homeomorphic equivalents can result in the imposition of one set of

---

\(^{54}\) *The Intra-Religious Dialogue Dialogue*, 91f.

\(^{55}\) Roger Rapp (private correspondence) cautions against an approach that would subsume mutual fecundation under the notion of homeomorphic equivalence which, he states, "is just a minor subset of dialogical dialogue and mutual fecundation." He adds that "only symbols, and not concepts, can exhibit homeomorphic equivalence." For these reasons, I agree that it would be valuable to develop the notion of mutual fecundation independently of its relationship to homeomorphic equivalence. Nonetheless, all that is being claimed here is that Panikkar's notion of homeomorphism needs to be understood in terms of its relationship to mutual fecundation.
cultural values on minority or less powerful cultures on the misapprehension that such values are universal. Panikkar shows how the concept of Human Rights as expressed in the United Nations Declaration is very much a western construct. Within this western world, human rights are considered the ultimate foundation of a just and humane society. Nonetheless, this vision of human rights is based on several assumptions that all cultures do not share. These include the following: there is a universal human nature common to all people which can be known through reason; the individual human person is autonomous and quite separate from society and the cosmos; a non-hierarchical, democratic, republican social order is the best way to guarantee human freedoms. Admitting that such values may be well and good (for some), they are clearly not the values held by all. In particular, Panikkar points out that the first concern of Indian cultures is not individual human rights but dharmic or cosmic order. Without going as far as to suggest that Dharma is the Indian homeomorphic equivalent of Western human rights, he says we need to start with reflection on Dharma if there is to be genuine intercultural understanding. Whereas Dharma represents "right order" which includes the notion of justice, it is more concerned with "the order of the entire reality." An Indian vision would also want to introduce notions such as hierarchy, karma, kinship, human responsibility and cosmic duty. In other words, as Panikkar proposes, "the discourse on 'Human Rights' would take on an altogether different character" on the basis of intercultural hermeneutics.

At this point it needs to be reiterated that the discovery of functional similarities between religions and cultures can only arise from the praxis of dialogical dialogue. It is only here that "topological transformations"
can occur and interpretations tested with respect to their accuracy in each tradition. Such interpretations do not claim universal objectivity, but neither are they to be dismissed as expressions of subjective bias. With regard to the former, it should now be clear that "no culture, tradition, ideology or religion can today speak for the whole of humankind." With regard to the latter, it should also be evident that there is no human truth divorced from the person or community that holds it. Moreover, because we are dealing with symbolic discourse, the discovery of homeomorphic equivalence is actually a moment of revelation or enlightenment in which the encounter between different religious or cultural worlds reaches a new stage of being. Not only is their growth in human consciousness, says Panikkar, but "the whole universe expands."

4. Some Kind of Response

Panikkar raises to new heights the importance of the other and the other's self-understanding in the human quest for truth, meaning and communicative praxis. By distinguishing three modes of discourse—\textit{mythos}, \textit{logos} and symbol—he provides a hermeneutical framework in which one's own truth and the truth of the other may be brought under a mutual horizon of understanding. Diatopical hermeneutics privileges the notion of truth as manifestation. It highlights the importance of testimony, participative knowledge, symbolic discourse and the power of tradition on human consciousness and identity. Dialogical dialogue is the 'method' which Panikkar introduces to incorporate, rather than exclude, these processes in intersubjective communication. If successful, symbolic transformation of experiences, new understanding,

---

57 \textit{Invisible Harmony}, 113.
and enlightened praxis will ensue. Panikkar's project aims for nothing less than a new revelatory consciousness leading to cosmotheandric solidarity across the world's distinctive cultural and religious traditions. Such a project demands some kind of response, evaluation or critique if only because its promised fruits are so urgently needed in the wake of social, political, economic, cultural and religious divisions currently being played out on the world stage.

The major critique of Panikkar's diatopical model is its explicit trust in the creative power of human traditions to be self-correcting. It will be argued he gives insufficient attention to the irrational, pathological and evil forces hidden within people's languages, myths and symbols. Moreover, such forces will distort communication and impact negatively on understanding. It will also be suggested that, for all the emphasis on the radical difference between the self and the other, there is an over-confidence in the universal connectedness of history evidenced by the notion of some primordial language underpinning such diverse human traditions. Certainly, such critiques need to be taken seriously. And they may point to Panikkar's need to further develop dialogical strategies that will aid the unmasking of forces that distort communication, freedom and rationality.59

However, it is a mistake to assume that Panikkar's diatopical model is opposed to the demands of reason—which he states always has the "veto power"—or to any method that will assist mutual critique and overturn misunderstanding.60 Panikkar's discourse is directed

59 Elsewhere I have suggested that Panikkar's hermeneutical procedures are most closely aligned with the "existential phenomenological hermeneutics" of Heidegger and Gadamer. Also called a "hermeneutics of retrieval," it requires the complementarity of Ricoeur's "hermeneutics of suspicion" with its extra attention to method and critique. See Gerard Hall, *Raimon Panikkar’s Hermeneutics of Religious Pluralism*, PhD dissertation, Catholic University of America (Ann Arbor: UMI, 1994), 299f.

60 In this context, it is worth noting that emancipative projects from Freudian
towards another level of meaning without which human traditions will be caught in the endless cycle of power relationships, ideological discord and inevitable misunderstandings. This is the level of meaning that reason alone cannot provide—certainly not if we accept there is a radical differentiation of human experience and intelligibility across cultures and religions. Let us recall that Panikkar's significant contribution to this discussion is the absence of shared meaning which makes a new kind of dialogue and a different type of hermeneutics necessary. This can only come about through the praxis of dialogue which, in turn, requires attention to the communicative possibilities of symbols. Without some kind of trust in the other and some form of optimism in the human spirit (or in God, Being, Truth, Non-being, Transcendence or Life itself), the other must remain the unknown stranger.

Nonetheless, the subtlety of Panikkar's thought should not be underestimated. This is evident, for example, in his notions of homology, functional equivalence and topological transformation. It is only in the actual praxis of dialogue among specific traditions that similarities and differences can be explored at the deepest level. The danger here is to assume the supremacy of the logos without first entering into symbolic and mythic engagement—and without commitment to personal transformation. Diatopical hermeneutics represents a radical departure from the narrower focus of rationalist hermeneutics normally practised in universities which too readily assume truth is located within a single intellectual tradition.

Panikkar's diatopical hermeneutics provides an original if provocative solution to the postmodern challenge of uncovering "what psycho-analysis to Habermas' ideal speech communication require communicative praxis with attention to the dysfunctional and liberative power of symbols and belief systems. Such strategies are quite in keeping with the demands of dialogical dialogue and in accord with Panikkar's diatopical hermeneutics.
is questionable and what is genuine in self and other, while opening self to other and allowing other to remain other."\textsuperscript{61} This is made possible through his uncovering the truth-power of symbolic discourse. For this to occur, dialectical strategies are inadequate. Diatopical hermeneutics tells us that dialogical strategies are required lest human conflicts, which appear to have no solution when viewed from the perspective of a single horizon or worldview, are opened up to previously unknown resolutions. People and human traditions, whether religious or secular, are capable of growth and change—especially through their mutual sharing with, receiving from and critiquing of themselves and the other in dialogue. This remains Panikkar's primary insight which he offers to all traditions including those of the academy. It remains for another occasion to develop the ontological foundations upon which his diatopical hermeneutics is based.\textsuperscript{62}


The author is introduced (p. 433) as: Dr Gerard Hall SM (1950), Associate Professor of Theology, St Paul's Theological College, Australian Catholic University, Brisbane, Australia; Gerard.Hall@acu.edu.au
