THE FOUNDATIONS OF RAIMON PANIKKAR’S RELIGIOUS THOUGHT AND VISION

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Introduction

When researching Raimon Panikkar’s work for a doctoral thesis a quarter of a century ago, I was mainly concerned to deepen my understanding and provide a coherent explanation of his then contemporary hermeneutics of religious pluralism. My supervisor, Stephen Happel, advised me that such an enterprise demanded I first research his initial Spanish writings in order to appreciate the foundations upon which he developed his more mature thought. By then I had already met Panikkar in Edinburgh (1989 Gifford lectures), and subsequently in Washington DC. When I broached the subject of his “development of thought”—including the question of continuity and discontinuity in that process—he was typically insightful and evasive at the same time! His insight was into the nature of human life and knowledge about which he understood ‘growth’ and ‘change’ to be integral dynamics. His evasiveness was more to do with his reluctance to admit any significant discontinuity or overturning of prior positions. I then (mistakenly) suggested he could be described as a “process philosopher/theologian”; in this he was not evasive stating that process philosophy/theology, though useful, was still caught in what he called the “western metaphysical paradigm”. I left my early encounters with Panikkar with far more questions than answers!

Consequently, my research into Panikkar’s early writings (1940s-1950s) was fuelled with intrigue. After all, most of these writings occurred during the time of Franco’s Spanish Republic and when Panikkar was an active, eventually ordained, member of Opus Dei. This conservative, pre-if not anti-Enlightenment Catholic Spain was the ‘Nazareth’ of Panikkar’s
beginnings. However, it was a Nazareth with a difference, namely in his intercultural and interreligious identity due to his Catalan Catholic mother and Indian Hindu father. Nonetheless, in this early phase, his writings do not focus on intercultural or interreligious issues. Rather, Panikkar seeks to make sense of his Christian/Catholic faith in this new era of modernity with its political upheavals, social unrest, cultural crises and religious disaffiliation.

My argument is that these writings are foundational for Panikkar’s later religious thought and vision in two senses: (1) they provide a philosophical, cosmological and theological language and intellectual framework capable of integrating classical and contemporary modes of thought and experience; (2) by highlighting the transcendental dimension of the human person, they provide a mystical foundation for the kind of depth-dialogue with other religious traditions and experiences that was to characterise his subsequent personal life-journey and academic scholarship. Moreover, I aim to demonstrate that most of the elements of what Panikkar eventually terms the “cosmotheandric vision” are contained as seeds within these first attempts to articulate a Catholic vision for the modern world.

My aim, then, is to establish how Panikkar’s initial writings are foundational for his later, mature thinking and vision—and to show that, while there is significant growth and development of such ideas, the fundamental processes are established prior to his depth-encounters with Hinduism, Buddhism and Secular Humanism in what I would call the second phase of Panikkar’s thought (1960s-1970s). The third phase (1980s-2000s) represents his mature, fully developed vision most evident in the
1989 *Gifford Lectures* and eventually published in 2010 as *The Rhythm of Being*.¹ I do of course admit that this division of three phases in Panikkar’s thought represented in neat decades is somewhat arbitrary, but arguably justifiable in broad terms of foci and patterns of thought. In any case, what follows is entirely derived from his foundational writings in 1940s & 1950s. A chronological list of his foundational writings is provided at the conclusion (presented according to first publication while noting that many of the writings are reprinted, expanded or redacted in later publications).

**Interdisciplinary Approach**

Panikkar’s multidisciplinary interests are evident with reference to his three earned doctorates in philosophy, science and theology. More poignantly, what is evident in his foundational years is the manner in which he attempts to both acknowledge the rightful place of each discipline in its own field of expertise all the while insisting on the interdependence of all three disciplines. This is based on his understanding that “reality is one and multiple at the same time”² such that a multiplicity of methods in dialogue is always required when it comes to asking ultimate questions concerning reality.

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Consequently, Panikkar introduces what he terms the *ontonomic* principle,³ originally developed as his way of elucidating the interdependent relationship between science and philosophy. Whereas the medieval world gave precedence to philosophy, relegating science to a position of dependency on philosophy (*heteronomy*), Enlightenment thought usurps or ignores philosophy and entrones the physical sciences as the path to all truth and knowledge (*autonomy*). Effectively, physics replaces metaphysics as the key to reality. His argument is that neither a paternalistic philosophy nor an absolutized science is adequate; physics and metaphysics need to form a "harmonious symbiosis".⁴

Panikkar points to the manner in which philosophy stresses the unitary, static character of reality and substantive thinking, whereas science emphasises multiplicity, dynamism and functional thought. However, since reality is both one and many, both approaches are necessary resulting in one of his enduring principles: “The object should condition the method”.⁵ Moreover, there is a need for an integrating principle which neither philosophy nor science can provide, a principle in which the unity and diversity of reality can be harmonised. Here he introduces the theological notion of the Trinity as the basis for understanding every ontological reality, whether divine or non-divine. Without an awareness of this transcendent dimension, he argues, we


⁴ *Ontonomía de la ciencia*, 28-32.

⁵ *Ontonomía de la ciencia*, 21.
inevitably fall into either “radical dualism” (denial of unity) or “cosmological monism” (denial of multiplicity).⁶

Panikkar’s earliest scientific studies concentrated on the physical universe to which he then applies his principle of ontonomy to validate the rights of science within its sphere of competence while indicating its limitations devoid of philosophical and theological reason. He shows how the law of entropy scientifically demonstrates that natural processes are one-dimensional and irreversible leading to the (mis)conception of the inevitable ‘running down’ and eventual ‘thermal death’ of the universe. This misconception of such inevitability is due to the absence of philosophical thinking (there are other dimensions of nature beyond the domain of science) and theological awareness (the transcendental dimension revealed through the Cosmic Law of Creation and the Mysterium Crucis).⁷

Similarly, Panikkar’s studies of the material universe reveal the necessity of an interdisciplinary approach. While modern physics since Werner Heisenberg (“uncertainty principle”) recognises the radical indeterminacy of matter, Panikkar points to the metaphysical implications (realm of philosophy) in the radical individuality and intimate relationality of material things.⁸ He also emphasises how indeterminacy implies there is something enigmatic, opaque, spontaneous and unintelligible in reality itself: not everything is measurable or knowable by the human mind! Theologically he understands the indeterminacy of

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⁶ Ontonomía de la ciencia, 7.
matter in relation to freedom, hope, life of the spirit, and the Christian doctrine of the resurrection of the flesh.

This notion of the individuality and irreducibility of material reality is likewise applied by Panikkar to the nature of time:⁹ there remains an opaque, mysterious, non-observable and immeasurable element which physics since Neils Bohr (“quantum theory”) now acknowledges. He reflects on how the paradoxical function of space and time—expressing both multiplicity and unity in the material universe—is a philosophical problem. For this, Panikkar proposes the notion of the “elemental rhythm in nature”¹⁰ which, he contends, includes both scientific and philosophical senses of time. This notion of cosmological time as the rhythm of the universe is also theological: “Time is not anything other than the rhythm with which bodies move towards God”.¹¹

In his philosophical study of “The Concept of Nature”,¹² Panikkar is drawn to the Aristotelian notion of the dynamism of being as a point of dialogue with the ecstatic findings of modern science. Nature, then, is not a static, abstract substance, but the “principle of movement and becoming” inherent in all and every created reality. In turn, this leads to theological concerns addressed by Panikkar in terms of the relationship between God and the cosmos: “It is not enough to say that nature reflects and imitates God. . . . God (also) imitates and reflects nature”.¹³ Rejecting both the

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¹⁰ Ontonomía de la ciencia, 350.
¹¹ Ontonomía de la ciencia, 352.
¹³ Ontonomía de la ciencia, 358.
purely immanent, pantheistic God and the notion of an utterly transcendent, absolute Being, Panikkar’s “cosmological testament”\(^{14}\) insists on the mutual interrelationship of science, philosophy and theology for the proper appreciation of God and nature. This also requires an interdisciplinary approach to the human person.

**Foundational Anthropology**

Panikkar takes the challenge of modernity seriously in the manner it fragments human experience and compartmentalises knowledge. He characterises modernity according to “three momentous events”: *loss of God* at the end of the Middle Ages; *loss of self* in the Enlightenment; *loss of the cosmic rhythm* with the advent of technology.\(^{15}\) The result is the experience of fragmentation or "anthropological disunity" evident in the modern experience of dis-ease and anxiety extending to all conscious and unconscious levels of human life. Hence, he argues, only a "radical solution" or a "new innocence" is capable of redressing the balance. What is needed, then, is a new visionary synthesis which unifies rather than fragments human life and experience.

For Panikkar, such a synthesis arises from the dialogue between modern humanism and classical Christian consciousness.\(^{16}\) It needs to

\(^{14}\) *Ontonomía de la ciencia*, 9, 359.


acknowledge modernity’s affirmation of the ultimate significance of history, matter, space, time and freedom. Yet, it must also integrate an appreciation of the transcendent dimension and final destiny of humanity and the cosmos. While Panikkar critiques humanism’s one-sided emphasis on history and finitude to the detriment of the life of the spirit, he is equally critical of the nature-grace dualism in much traditional Christian teaching. In this regard, he prefers the more classical anthropological approach which understands the human being as a microcosm in which all the elements of the universe—matter, spirit and divinity—are reflected in one another.

A genuinely integral anthropology, then, must cultivate knowledge of matter (science), history (humanism) and transcendence (theology). The integration of these approaches is likened to a chemical reaction in which the positive insights of tradition and modernity are transformed into a new compound. In this integrated human vision, history becomes salvation history, and anthropology culminates in the Christian understanding of the human person oriented towards transcendence. Panikkar often stresses that no purely ‘theoretical’ solution is adequate. Equally unacceptable is a merely ‘natural’ understanding of the human person. Yet, the understanding of grace and transcendence requires a revision of the role that supernatural faith plays in human knowledge.

Panikkar rejects Enlightenment’s separation of faith and reason. To the contrary, he argues that faith is a constitutive form of human knowing. He articulates his position with regard to Jacobi’s notion of ‘sentiment’.  

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In Panikkar's view, Jacobi is correct in emphasizing the immediacy of experience as significant in human knowing. However, Panikkar is critical of the manner in which Jacobi simply inverts the dualism of mind and spirit: faith and intuition replace thinking and reason. Panikkar's own philosophy of sentiment seeks to establish ‘faith’ as a supra-rational rather than an irrational form of knowledge. Accordingly, supernatural and supra-rational faith is perceived to be the integrative faculty of knowledge that works in unison with intellect and will. Although sentiment is not infallible, neither is it arbitrary.

Panikkar warns that any anthropology which ignores sentiment falls into rationalism. Equally, any philosophy of sentiment that ignores the supernatural basis of faith falls into irrationalism. An integral anthropology ignores neither sentiment nor reason, but situates them both according to the theandric (divine-human) structure of the human being whose life, goal and destiny is the divine mystery.\(^{18}\) This leads Panikkar to speak of the human need for “confidence in reality” which involves self-transcending faith and human trust in the other. Such trust or confidence is not based on self-knowledge and reflection, but on a more primordial human orientation that ‘knows’, prior to external reflection, that one’s true identity is ‘beyond’ oneself.

This theandric anthropology is then metaphysically grounded in the relational unity of the created world and the "communion of all beings".\(^{19}\) This also demonstrates Panikkar's understanding of the human person as


\(^{19}\) "La Confidencia," 58f.
inherently social, relational and cosmic. On this basis, faith in God can be expressed as confidence in the earth and in all beings. Panikkar's notion of "theandric confidence" becomes then an important expression—or 'sentiment’—for understanding his overall programme for an integral anthropology that is compatible with both the Christian tradition and post-Enlightenment consciousness. It is clearly expressed as a Christian theandric vision built on the “Law of the Cross”.²⁰

Equally it is oriented towards a transformed culture and the “eruption of a new order” when all things will be made new. As such, it prefigures the reinterpretation of classical approaches to God that are also accessible to modern human experience.

**Divine Presence and Absence**

Panikkar’s foundational approach to the question of God follows the same dialogical method he exhibits in his scientific and anthropological writings. Classical Christian understanding is filtered through the eyes of post-Enlightenment perceptions of reality, and modern cultural understanding is interpreted in reference to classical Christian teachings. The fruits of this theological dialogue can be summarized in the following manner.²¹ Christ is the centre of the universe and the Church is necessary for salvation. However, these central doctrines of Christian faith are not the exclusive property of any one historical tradition; nor are they ‘juridical’ concepts, but ‘mystical’ ones. Panikkar’s inclusivism stresses a cosmological reading of Christian revelation which rejects all dualistic

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interpretations of nature and grace, history and transcendence, time and eternity. This also means that the divine presence is falsely interpreted when it is set within an overly spiritualized and individualized eschatology. The post-Enlightenment insight into temporality and historicity needs to be fully incorporated within Christian theologies of creation, incarnation and resurrection.

However, for Panikkar, the Christian Trinity emerges as his most powerful symbol of "unity-in-diversity" which is not confined to the mystery of the Godhead—One God revealed as Threefold—but permeates every dimension of reality.²² He maintains that Western thought, with its emphasis on the unity and transcendence of God, has sacrificed awareness of the multiplicity of reality and the immanence of God. Being careful to avoid pantheism, the West has preferred to risk atheism. Panikkar attaches much of the blame for this inadequate thinking on the empty and abstract concept of being that has so plagued western metaphysics to the point that a formal and abstract unity is imposed on the being, God. Moreover, he challenges the dualistic separation of the immanent and economic Trinity that has dominated classical Christian thinking. Part of his effort is directed towards overturning this polarized understanding of the Trinity. He prefers to speak of the total harmonious relationship of the divine, human and cosmic dimensions of reality.

Clearly, Panikkar's concern is not in elaborating a theology of the Trinity as such, but in the articulation of a Trinitarian theology of the universe that is alive to the divine presence within creation.²³ For this, he states, he is especially reliant on modern existentialist thought rather than the static thinking of so much of

²² See, for example, multiple essays in Humanismo y Cruz.
²³ See especially El concepto de naturaleza, 233-283.
the Christian tradition. Yet he also relies on scholars from the minor Christian tradition, such as Pseudo-Dionysius and Bonaventure, who perceive the Trinitarian presence in nature. Panikkar then develops the Trinitarian symbol evident within the world of nature (order-love-goal), the structure of interpersonal existence (I-thou-it) as well as within the ‘whole’ (cosmic-human-divine) reality. Evidently, Panikkar's Trinitarian universe is understood in relational terms, reflecting the inner dynamism of the ultimate-Trinitarian reality. The approach shows how modern consciousness is able to retrieve and throw new light onto classical Christian doctrines.

There remains the more fundamental question of whether or not modern thought is capable of dialoguing with the “hidden God” who has seemingly disappeared from the historical stage. Panikkar recognizes that the disappearance of God from modern consciousness is an historical and cultural reality. He also suggests that it represents a "profound shock" and a new cultural experience of "the void". Addressing the issue theologically, he draws on the classical understanding of the ineffable mystery of God taught by Jesus, the prophets and Christian theologians. This enables an interpretation of the modern "eclipse of God" in terms of a new and more profound experience of the hiddenness and darkness of God.

Nonetheless, there is also need to acknowledge human responsibility for the modern state of affairs. In particular, rationalism and humanism retard an understanding of the full truth of reality. While also rejecting the over-spiritualized "transcendental solution", Panikkar provides a cosmo-theological reading of the mystery of the Cross in which the historical

particularity of modern culture is intimately related to the final destiny of the universe. Consequently, through the experience of the void, modernity is invited to a new revelatory experience that encourages human freedom and responsibility in the history of divine self-disclosure.

**Conclusion**

Anyone familiar with Panikkar’s subsequent writings will recognise the significance of these foundational writings even though the context of his subsequent endeavours profoundly changes. In his foundational years, Panikkar’s concern is to show how an interdisciplinary approach is necessary if traditional Christian doctrine is to be meaningful for a post-Enlightenment world. Here we concentrate on naming those principles, themes and methods which continue to influence his later approaches to dialogue with multiple religious and cultural traditions in the Orient and beyond.

In these initial writings, Panikkar exhibits a faith, trust or confidence that diverse traditions are able to enter into fruitful dialogue. At least in terms of Western culture, he assumes an interconnectedness between classical and modern forms of belief that are capable of forming a “higher synthesis” despite diverse, at times contradictory, beliefs. In particular, he attempts to demonstrate that classical Christian belief may be readily expressed in a manner that makes sense to modern existentialist thought. Yet, he also seeks to show that existentialism is inadequate in articulating belief in transcendence without discourse with Christian teaching.
Methodologically, his principle of ontonomy is critical in establishing the rights, boundaries and relationships of all fields of research. As we have seen, he applies this especially to the fields of science, philosophy and theology: each has its area of competence; yet its insights and methodological procedures are not universal. This is also expressed in his important principle that “the object should condition the method”. The sin against ontonomy is the belief that one approach, such as the scientific method, is adequate for all fields of enquiry.

Epistemologically, Panikkar focuses on the problem of dualism which he notes in both traditional Christian theology and modern philosophy. In the former, it is evident in the dichotomies between nature and grace, or history and transcendence. In the latter, he notes the positions of Rene Descartes and Jacobi who posit extreme divisions between mind and spirit, or reason and intuition. In contrast, Panikkar argues for a ‘third’ integrating factor at work in human experience and knowledge.

Panikkar’s notion of ‘theandrism’ relies on the retrieval of an ancient doctrine of Christian belief which is transposed for the modern world to speak of the divine-human identity of the human person. He links this to his philosophy of ‘sentiment’ as a way of establishing the importance of a supernatural faith as the integrating faculty of knowledge. Yet, Panikkar equally rejects overspiritualised notions of faith and transcendence which relegate time, history and freedom to insignificance. This is a further example of his openness to the insights of rationalism and humanism while simultaneously rejecting their more extreme claims.

A significant feature of these writings is the manner in which classical philosophical sources are reinterpreted in relation to the ecstatic findings...
of modern science to demonstrate the dynamic thrust of the cosmos and the transcendent goal of human history. The telos of the universe is also interpreted theologically. Central Christian doctrines of Christ and the Trinity, Creation and the Eschaton, Church and Eucharist, Cross and Resurrection, Original Sin and Incarnation are all reinterpreted according to the modern shift of consciousness from a static to an evolutionary worldview.

Moreover, Panikkar’s dynamic and transcendent view of reality is reflected in his awareness that human experience of the divine is also evolving. Although often interpreted negatively as the disappearance of God from the earthly stage, Panikkar recognises in the ‘void’ a new disclosure of the hidden God which challenges humanity to be open to this privileged experience of divine self-disclosure.

Even though Panikkar does not explicitly employ the term ‘cosmotheandric’ to describe reality, it is not difficult to recognise its features in his ‘theandric’, ‘cosmic’ and “telo-theological” vision of the universe in which divine, human and earthly dimensions are interpreted in their interrelationship with one another. The importance of resolving the tension between the ‘one’ and the ‘many’ without resorting to ‘monism’ or ‘dualism’, or simply giving into chaos, is demonstrated in multiple ways, not least through notions of the “rhythm of nature”, the role of faith in human knowing and the Trinitarian mystery of God which is reflected in every created reality. These are clearly the foundations upon which the entire corpus of Panikkar’s future life and work as the “Apostle of Interfaith Dialogue” is based.


"La Confidencia: Análisis de un sentimiento" [Confidence: Analysis of a Sentiment]. *Revista Española de Filosofía* (Madrid) CSIC (1963): 43-62. [According to Panikkar, this was written in 1946 (Note 1, pg. 43)].


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**Note:** This is an edited version of the paper presented at the International Symposium on Raimon Panikkar organised by the Ferrater Mora Chair of