Mysticism and Spirituality
Part 1: Mysticism, Fullness of Life

Raimon Panikkar (1918-2010) is a most profound and original thinker. The English publication of his Opera Omnia emerges with this first of two books on Mysticism and Spirituality. These “complete works” are not merely the reproduction of earlier writings, but represent Panikkar’s own abridgement, refinement, selection and extension of his previous writings from the perspective of his final years.

Why begin with mysticism? Because, he states, it is the “indispensable hermeneutical key” inspiring all his writings (xiii). It is also his primary category for critiquing his bête noire, Western body-soul dualism, with its forgetfulness of spirit. One needs to see with the ‘third eye’ to integrate all human ways of knowing, being and loving. Panikkar’s mantra: mysticism is not for the privileged few, but “the integral human experience” involving a “new innocence,” prayer, silence and contemplation. The Christian examples of Clare, John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila (93-104) are given prominence even as Panikkar notes how monotheism is problematic in encouraging mysticism.

The third section of the work, entitled “The Mystical Experience,” is the most systematic especially through its presentation of nine sutras on mysticism (127-210) and “mystical languages” (211-242). Here Panikkar’s intercultural and interreligious credentials come to the fore as he explores diverse concepts, symbols and images, from both theistic and non-theistic traditions, pointing to the one, same, ineffable mystery. Panikkar is like a spiritual master presenting a series of reflections on a similar theme from multiple standpoints. If he overwhelms with his knowledge of philosophers and theologians, east and west, ancient and modern, all voices may contribute to the mystical harmony – or what he has long called the “cosmotheandric vision.”

Panikkar correctly states: “this book is not for the impatient” (110). It can be dense, repetitive, and without always clear referencing
to earlier Panikkar works. Some may find its lack of engagement with contemporary scholarship on mysticism problematic. For all that, the book is a worthy beginning for the (re-)writing of Panikkar’s essential insights. Finally, for many, Panikkar’s Prayers (243-246; 271-273) will convey the depth mystical experience more profoundly than the other thousands of words.