CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

This dissertation explores the principles, themes and methods which emerge in Raimon Panikkar's hermeneutics of religious pluralism. Although covering the entire span of Panikkar's known writings between 1942 and 1992, there is no intention of presenting, interpreting or assessing the complete composite of those writings. The focus of our work is on three dimensions: hermeneutics, religion and pluralism.

By hermeneutics we mean the art and method of interpretation which Panikkar uses and develops, whether implicitly or explicitly, in his writings on religion and pluralism. In general terms, we can speak of Panikkar's hermeneutics as art-form and method of conversation among distinct academic disciplines and diverse religious and cultural traditions.

By religion, we mean the approach to the ultimate mystery as this is understood in Panikkar's evolving sense of the Godhead, Transcendence, Being, Truth or simply Reality. The fact that religion means different things to different people becomes the central focus of the problematic.

Pluralism refers to the multidisciplinary, interreligious, cross-cultural context of Panikkar's study as well as the specific content or meaning that he applies to the notion of pluralism. Any hermeneutic of religious pluralism attempts to make intelligible the fact of many religions. Panikkar's hermeneutics
of religious pluralism poses the question of the intelligibility of "multiple religious ways" once they are brought into confrontation and dialogue.

In part, our approach is chronological and developmental. This enables us to locate Panikkar's principles, methods and themes according to the particular historical, cultural and religious contexts from which they emerge. In Panikkar's case, this is especially pertinent insofar as it demonstrates the narrative basis of his scholarship and reinforces his principle of the primacy of praxis over theory. The approach also provides us with deepened insight into the little-known foundations of his work in the physical and chemical sciences as well as in philosophy and theology. Indeed, the seed of Panikkar's approach to interreligious dialogue is already present in his initial interdisciplinary hermeneutics of the 1940s and 1950s, prior to any thematic attempt to bring Christianity into dialogue with other religions.

This latter task is taken up in earnest during the 1960s when he produces his major writings in the areas of christian-hindu and christian-buddhist dialogue. During this period he also formulates distinctive approaches to religious pluralism based upon his "multireligious experience." The 1970s and 1980s represent a further shift in horizons which we nominate as Panikkar's "secular turn" and which has important ramifications for his understanding of religion and his ongoing hermeneutics of religious pluralism. Secularization is experienced as a religious phenomenon and so moves the question of religious pluralism beyond the realm of traditional religious forms. The result is a more radical hermeneutic of pluralism which embraces both traditional religious consciousness and contemporary secular awareness.
While our intention is to deal with each phase of Panikkar's writings in an integral fashion, we also employ certain selective procedures. These may be summarized as the principles of continuity, growth and integration.

The *principle of continuity* means that, by focussing on Panikkar's enduring dialogical concerns, we show the fundamental consistency of his themes, methods and approaches to religious pluralism.

The *principle of growth* acknowledges that this basic consistency does not imply stagnation. There is transformation and even rupture in his interpretations and procedures which become apparent in the historical unfolding of his writings.

The *principle of integration* is more than the summation of these first two principles. It recognizes a certain *telos* in Panikkar's work which we identify as the "cosmotheandric" symbol. Our contention is that this symbol is present in a rudimentary way in his earlier writings and that, in the process of his life, it takes on increasing thematic significance.

Evidently, our historical reconstruction of Panikkar's writings is made from the vantage point of our knowledge of his later and more radical hermeneutics of religious pluralism. Without falling into the trap of reading history backwards, we show an inner-dynamism in his work which leads rather naturally from his foundations in interdisciplinary studies, to the *praxis* of interreligious dialogue, and then to the more comprehensive interreligious and cross-cultural pluralism of his later writings.

The movement from one phase to another is less a matter of 'development' of ideas than the 'depthing' of experience and a corresponding 'expansion' of
horizons. Ideas 'spiral', that is, they emerge and reemerge, taking on new meaning and different forms according to the particular pluralistic challenges that arise in each narrative phase. The integrating point is finally Panikkar's own life-experience which has all the markings of a religious pilgrimage.

The method we follow is descriptive, interpretative and, where appropriate, analytical and critical. The approach, nonetheless, follows one of Panikkar's own procedural principles which states that the object must condition the method. Such a method is dialogical and hermeneutical: it seeks understanding through opening lines of communication among different life-worlds; it places emphasis on the experiential basis of knowledge; and it looks towards new horizons of meaning that are disclosed in the encounter of contemporaneity and tradition.

The notion of truth we employ is not merely or primarily propositional. Hermeneutical truth is a human event-of-understanding, a fusion-of-horizons, that includes and transcends the movement of the intellect.¹ Moreover, since the `object' of our enquiry is a religious hermeneutic--or a hermeneutic of `ultimate' truth--we do well to acknowledge at the start that there is a `transcendent' dimension to reality that human knowledge cannot `know' through scientific research or dialectical procedures. In this, we follow Panikkar whose `method' could be described as `inductive'. The Protestant Institute of Theology provides a helpful description of this approach:

The inductive approach . . . is a process of confrontation and reinterpretation. . . . Concretely: we shall come to know a situation, analyze it on every level, penetrate it from within and assume it into our own lives. . . . We shall begin to master problems of language, communication and behaviour in the complexity of their different dimensions. The indispensable discipline will consist in going forward without hesitation in an untiring effort to listen and to understand with as open a mind as possible. The "method of sympathy" ("suffer with") is doubtless the only one that will really open up the road to knowledge.²

Our task includes these dimensions of confrontation, reinterpretation, analysis, penetration, mastering language and communication, listening and understanding. Only then may we assume a more critical stance in which to situate and assess Panikkar's project.

Accordingly, the dissertation proceeds along the following lines. Chapter Two is an investigation of Panikkar's interdisciplinary hermeneutics with reference to his initial scientific, philosophical and theological studies. Our purpose is to establish his enduring hermeneutical and dialogical procedures in the context of an intra-western conversation between classical christian consciousness and the post-enlightenment mind. Our presentation highlights the principles, themes and methods which emerge in this phase of his writings and prove foundational for his later hermeneutics of religious pluralism.

In the light of those foundations, Chapter Three examines Panikkar's interreligious and cross-cultural hermeneutics which emanate from the east-west encounter of his Indian pilgrimage. In this chapter, we explore Panikkar's three ways of establishing grounds for interreligious encounter as he deals with

issues of unity and plurality, concreteness and universality, and the possibility of dialogue among theistic and non-theistic religions. Noting points of convergence and dissimilarity among the three ways, we establish a radicalization within Panikkar's hermeneutics in the second half of the 1960s.

Chapter Four views Panikkar's further change of horizons as the result of the experience of secularization. We provide an account of his hermeneutics of secularization in terms of its impact on human consciousness and religious experience. This involves a description of his critiques of both traditional religion and contemporary secularization. We then proceed to identify Panikkar's emerging notions of religion which significantly alter his perceptions of the challenge of religious pluralism in the secular age.

Chapter Five is a comprehensive exploration and analysis of Panikkar's post-secular hermeneutics of religious pluralism according to the categories of *mythos, logos* and *symbol*. These categories are understood as distinct though mutually related modes of discourse. The purpose of this chapter is to provide a coherent reading of Panikkar's mature hermeneutics of pluralism and to indicate that such hermeneutics is fundamentally consistent with the principles, themes and methods of his earlier interreligious writings.

Chapter Six concludes the work of this dissertation through a dialectical, hermeneutical and rhetorical reading of Panikkar's dialogical project. The approach here is more critical and evaluative. Consequently, we take into account the small amount of critical assessment that is currently available with regard to Panikkar's later proposals on religious pluralism. We also situate his contribution to the theology of interreligious dialogue and christian theological
method with respect to contemporary hermeneutical and rhetorical theories. Our aim is to establish that Panikkar is an important postmodern, hermeneutical theologian.