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TOWARD A CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY OF THE WORLD'S RELIGIONS

Author(s): WALTER H. CAPPS

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TOWARD A CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY OF THE WORLD'S RELIGIONS

Editor's Note: As Director of the Institute of Religious Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara, Walter Capps was the organizer of the symposium in honor of Raimundo Panikkar. Although he acted as chairman of the symposium, he did not present a formal paper, but submitted the following article for publication in the present collection of studies of Panikkar's thought.

To come to terms with the very provocative suggestions and contentions of Raimundo Panikkar, one must place them within the intellectual and religious contexts in which they make most intrinsic sense. I propose that Panikkar's viewpoint is not to be identified as history of religion, first of all, or even as comparative religion, though it is responsible for important contributions in both of these areas. Instead, it should be taken as a creative theological interpretation of humankind's total and ongoing history, an interpretation which is shaped by a decidedly mystical apprehension of the nature of reality.

In the following paragraphs, I want to approach the distinctiveness of Panikkar's orientation from two sides. First, to identify some of the characteristic features of his "theology of non-Christian religions," I will compare his proposals with sketches of those set forth by two other prominent twentieth-century Catholic theologians, Karl Rahner and Jean Daniélou. Then, following this comparative portrayal, I will offer some suggestions of my own regarding the nature, temper, and conceptual style of Panikkar's thought.

I

To set the context, we refer to an essay by Karl Rahner on "Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions" which is included as a chapter in volume five of his *Theological Investigations*.¹ This essay is certainly not the only statement Rahner has made on the subject, nor should it be treated as a

Walter H. Capps is Professor of Religious Studies in the University of California, Santa Barbara, President of the Council on the Study of Religion, and Program Director and Fellow of the Robert M. Hutchins Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions. His most recent book, co-authored with Wendy M. Wright, is Silent Fire: An Invitation to Western Mysticism.

summary of his current judgment. Nevertheless, as a lucid example of an enlightened and somewhat typical Catholic attitude toward non-Christian religions, the essay deserves attention.

Two background factors are important with regard to the placement and intention of the article. First, it comes under the heading of “Questions on the Theology of History” in the book’s table of contents. Second, it belongs to a larger argument on behalf of “openness” in Catholic thought and teaching. The heading indicates that Rahner, like Panikkar, wishes to view humankind’s entire religious history as a comprehensive whole. The argument for “openness” is one of several indications that he wants to approach his subject from something other than an exclusivist or narrow Christian perspective.

Rahner’s position is sketched in four theses, developed in sequential and cumulative style. The first is that “Christianity understands itself as the absolute religion, intended for all men, which cannot recognize any other religion beside itself as of equal right.”² The justification for this attitude rests on the conviction that the Christian religion is the product of “God’s free self-revelation” to man. But Rahner adds a significant qualification to the thesis. Recognizing a difficulty in attributing an absolute status to a religion which has specific (and thus relative) historical origins, he offers some distinctions with regard to the duration of time Christianity has been in existence. He separates the period of time from the birth of Jesus of Nazareth forward from all previous time; then says, strictly speaking, that the absoluteness of Christianity pertains to the “destination” of the world. He will not say that Christianity has enjoyed its proper absolute status all along. Rather, his view is that religious pluralism will yield to a monolithic situation some day, that is, some day in the future. Then it will become clear that all of human history moves toward a common religious destiny. Only in terms of history’s ultimate destination can Christianity be conceived as an absolute religion. It defines where humankind will someday be. Its absolute status pertains only in an anticipatory way to the meaning of human history.

In his second thesis, Rahner turns toward an evaluation of non-Christian religion. From a Christian theological perspective, the second thesis contends, “non-Christian religions can be recognized as *lawful* (or *rightful*) religions because they have been formed by natural knowledge of God.”³ This is another way of saying that non-Christian religions are not illegal: they do not exist in violation of the will of God. On the contrary, all advocates of religion — Christians and non-Christians alike — are recipients of supernatural grace. Supernatural grace is in evidence in the very fact that there is religion. Rahner concedes that “it is a priori quite possible to suppose that there are supernatural, grace-filled elements in non-Christian religion.”⁴ Similarly, it is conceivable that other planets than earth contain some forms of life. The possibility does not imply, of course, that the Christian can condone everything that belongs

to the non-Christian religion. Nor does it mean that non-Christian religions are valid religions, even in part. It simply means that the fact or presence of non-Christian religions is not a violation of divine providence. Thus, to call non-Christian religions *lawful* is to intend the following:

A lawful religion means here an institutional religion whose 'use' by man at a certain period can be regarded on the whole as a positive means of gaining the right relationship to God and thus for the attaining of salvation, a means which is therefore positively included in God's plan of salvation.⁵

The third thesis, an expansion of the second, recommends a way in which Christians might regard adherents of non-Christian religions. Its preamble plays upon the legality of non-Christian religions, and traces the implications of the presence of gratuitous elements in such religions:

. . . Christianity does not simply confront the member of an extra-Christian religion as a mere non-Christian, but as someone who can and must already be regarded in this or that aspect as an anonymous Christian.⁶

The response is dictated by the conviction that all persons have been touched by divine grace. Thus, there is emphasis on the word anonymous, and there is attention to the process by which the anonymous Christian (any and all persons not consciously Christian) is transformed into

someone who now also knows about his Christian belief in the depths of his grace-endowed being by objective reflection and in the profession of faith which is given a social form in the church.⁷

The situation Rahner describes is the setting for missionary work. But the Christian missionary should go forth under the conviction that the non-Christian world is inhabited by an anonymous Christianity.

The fourth thesis refers to the Christian's expectation in the age between now and the culmination of history. Rahner views the time from now to the end as being devoted more and more fully to an explication of religious awareness:

. . . the church will not so much regard herself today as the exclusive community of those who have a claim to salvation but rather as the historically tangible vanguard and the historically and socially constituted explicit expression of what the Christian hopes is present as a hidden reality even outside the visible church.⁸

Given this contention — Rahner would call it a vision — the Christian is free to view all apparent hostility to Christianity not as deliberate resistance, but as a sign that the explication process still has a way to go. When all things become known, it will be made manifest that those "who oppose . . . are merely those who have not yet recognized what they nevertheless already really are."⁹ On that day, the differences and antagonisms between the Christian and non-Christian religions will disappear. Gradually, but increasingly, the implicit will be made explicit, and the things

which have been anonymous will acquire name and place. Because of this expectation, the Christian has a perfect historical and religious right “to regard the non-Christian as a Christian who has not yet fully come to himself reflectively.”¹⁰ From start to finish, it is a matter of making the pre-conscious conscious — a process which articulates beautifully with Joseph Maréchal’s revision of Kantian critical philosophy, a revision in which Rahner’s theology is thoroughly immersed.

Having established the normative status of the Christian religion, Rahner has proceeded to infer that everything valuable religiously is in some sense anonymously Christian. Hence, working with a fundamental contrast between the conscious and the unconscious, knowing and unknowing awareness and lack of awareness, Rahner can refer to so-called “non-Christian religion” as having been comprehended within the religious context. The chief theological sanction for this is the Thomistic thesis that “grace perfects nature, but does not destroy it.” Everything natural — including non-Christian religions — can be affirmed, but it also lacks completion. And the process of making conscious and bringing to perfection is interpreted as *explication* (sometimes referred to as *explicitation*). For the usual practitioners of the paradigm, it was natural religion that was made explicit in so-called revealed religion. Rahner views normative Christianity as gaining progressive explication in non-Christian religious experience. And all of this is implicit in Rahner’s understanding that the advocates of non-Christian religions, whoever they may be, “are merely those who have not yet recognized what they nevertheless already really are.”¹¹

The same attitude and approach are very much in evidence in Cardinal Jean Daniélou’s treatment of the relationship between Christianity and non-Christian religions. We need not go over ideological grounds which Daniélou shares with Rahner. There are differences in background, training, and emphasis, of course. Chiefly, whereas Rahner has concentrated in systematic theology and philosophy of religion, Daniélou directed his attention toward early Christian history. Furthermore, whereas Rahner belongs consciously to a school of thinkers influenced by the “neo-Kantianism” of Maréchal, Daniélou is neither aligned nor connected so particularly. But given such differences or variations, the fundamental attitude is one and the same: Christianity can be regarded as the transformer of the other religious traditions because it was uniquely formed by revealed religious truth. Daniélou’s task is to formulate this conception in such a fashion that it does not exclude the value of other religions or imply an attitude of Christian disdain. He writes:

What we are saying here should not be misunderstood. In no way is it a question of deprecating the examples of interior life . . . which we find in non-Christian religions.¹²

However, because Daniélou is more of a student of non-Christian

religions than Rahner, he is much more specific in his attitude toward them. For example, he notes that Christianity must always give stress to precise historical events; other religious traditions can rely upon cultivation of the interior life of persons. By giving stress to historical events, the Christian religion subscribes to "the intervention of the eternal in time." Daniélou thinks many of the other religions argue for an eternal world, but show no propensity for a divine intervention into the world. In his view, Christianity understands Jesus' role to be both decisive and essential; other religions elevate other religious figures or understand Christ merely in an archetypal, symbolic fashion. Daniélou is also distressed by the idea that the fundamental Christian doctrines are implicit, though in disguised or inexplicit form, in non-Christian religions. He is aware of the real differences in this respect. And yet, even after he refuses to find real analogues to Christianity in non-Christian religions, he is unwilling to write them off:

Does this mean that the natural religions have not attained certain truth concerning God? Such a statement would be inaccurate. St. Paul himself teaches that "since the creation of the world, the invisible perfections of God are known through visible things." The non-Christian religions have been able to grasp that which human reason left to itself is capable of discovering, that is, God's exterior, his existence, and his perfection as they are manifest through his action to the world.¹³

In another place, Daniélou adds:

Thus, compared with Christianity, the pagan religions seem out of date and distorted. Still, they contain some worthwhile elements.¹⁴

He agrees that the disappearance of such religions would constitute an impoverishment of the human spirit. With reference to a papal encyclical on the subject, he reminds his reader:

The church has never treated the doctrines of the pagans with contempt and disdain; rather, she has freed them from all error, then completed them and crowned them with Christian wisdom.¹⁵

The formula Daniélou draws upon is the typical and expected one: grace perfects nature, without destroying it. Christianity completes and perfects the religious quests and insights of non-Christian religions.

Thus we find early Christianity integrating the values of Greek philosophy after having purified them. Thus shall we be able to see in the future Christianity assuming all the values contained in the asceticism of the Hindus or the wisdom of Confucius, after having purified them.¹⁶

II

The suggestions made by Jean Daniélou have been applied and illustrated in significant detail by Raimundo Panikkar, who, through his own

parental lineage, lives and breathes within a Catholic-Hindu environment. He is distinguished eminently for being one of the few theologians working in this area who possesses large first-hand familiarity with the Asian religions he speaks and writes about, as well as knowing some of the languages of their primary texts.¹⁷

Thus, the advances Panikkar has made upon former Catholic efforts to come to terms with non-Christian religions, so-called, is due not solely to his academic training in the history of religions, the history of Christian thought, and the philosophy of science. It also derives from his native and cultivated affinity for at least two major religious traditions, and his keen appreciation for a variety of others. Throughout his career — in his instance, career and life intersect remarkably — he has endeavored to position himself as one who considers religions not as an outsider, an observer from afar, or a curious spectator, but, from within, as much as possible, as an advocate. The spirit of this intention is captured in the following commentary on the biblical injunction to love one's neighbor as oneself:

Understanding my neighbor means understanding him as he understands himself, which can be done only if I rise above the subject-object dichotomy, cease to know him as an object and come to know him as myself. (10, 11)

Typically, then, returning to the European literary scene after a fifteen-year absence, during which time he was on pilgrimage in Asia, Panikkar explained, "I 'left' as a Christian, I 'found' myself a Hindu, and I 'return' a Buddhist, without having ceased to be a Christian" (9, 2). Clearly, this is a different experience from Rahner's, who approaches non-Christian religions in intellectual terms first and primarily as a problem for Christian theological reflection. It is a different approach, too, from Daniélou's, which brings a historical dimension to theological considerations, while restricting the scope to the formative era in Christian history. In addition to covering a much wider territory than the others, Panikkar's approach is also distinguished in that it views Christianity as something other than a competitor in an arena filled with other aspirants toward cultural, religious, and intellectual respectability. Hence, while the form and spirit of his response bear structural and conceptual similarities to the approaches of Rahner and Daniélou, the detail is many times more elaborate, the suggestiveness far richer, and the creative insights more daring and extensive.

To be sure, some of the theological formulations enunciated by Rahner and Daniélou also appear in Panikkar's writings. It is certain, at least early in his career, that he wishes to sustain Christianity's normative status. But in doing so, he tries hard to find a way to maintain the normative in a non-exclusive way. As he puts it:

To think that one people, one culture, one religion has the right — or the duty for that matter — to dominate all the rest belongs to a past period in world history. Our contemporary degree of consciousness and our present-day conscience, East and West, finds . . . such a pretension utterly untenable. The meeting point is neither my house nor the mansion of my neighbor, but the crossroads outside the walls, where we may eventually decide to put up a tent — for the time being. (19, 61)

Thus, he approaches the distinctiveness of the Christian religion via qualifiers which carry a “both-and” rather than an “either-or” set of inferences. Similarly, according to the pattern of which we have already had examples, Panikkar interprets non-Christian religions as being carriers and containers of actual, implicit, and not always conscious religious truths. Where implicit, such truths need to be explicated. Where unrecognized, such contentions need to be brought to consciousness. Rahner approached the issue in this fashion, as did Daniélou. The products of Panikkar’s non-polemical synthetic efforts sound very Christian — witness the title of his first and best-known book, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*. But complexities, qualifications, and constant reader-perplexities tend to make the equations inexact, and to frustrate the interpreter’s disposition to treat Panikkar’s contentions as a superb example of a highly-refined but nevertheless rather traditional Catholic theological position.

The uniqueness of Panikkar’s perspective derives from the way he envisions the process of explication. Many theologians have assigned the Christian religion an explicative function with respect to the convictions and beliefs of non-Christian religions. The assumption is that the other religions contain bits and pieces of religious truth, and the task of identifying these truths is left for the Christian interpreter. This familiar pattern of interpretation and evaluation works to assign Christian sensitivity the task of explicating the implicit truths in the other religious traditions. The theological warrant for this, as we have noted, is to be found in the conception of the relation of grace and nature: “grace perfects nature, without destroying it.” In explicating the truths of non-Christian religions, Christianity seeks to bring them to self-realization as well as to a conscious recognition that they must be transcended (perfected) by formulations containing Christian truths. With precedents in such abundance, one would expect this attitude to prevail, too, in Panikkar’s writings, especially given the fact that he builds upon explication.

But, once again, the familiar category is transformed. In Panikkar’s view, it is not simply Christianity which acts as the agent of explication on behalf of a non-Christian religion. Rather, both the Christian and the non-Christian religion work to explicate one another. Each has something substantial to present to the dialogue. Both contribute to the extension and better welfare of each. The non-Christian religions affect Christianity

as Christianity affects non-Christian religions. Both parties to dialogue are active participants in the explicatory process.

Within the history of religious consciousness, the Christian religion has assumed the role of transforming other religious traditions. In transforming them, as, for example, in the third and fourth centuries, A.D., when the new religion engaged the religions and philosophies of the Graeco-Roman world, Christianity also led them to a stage of development which, in Panikkar's view, they could not have achieved on their own. But, given the transforming function of Christianity, the history of religious consciousness also points forward to a time — and it may be either present or imminent — when similar transformational enactments will be exercised upon all of the living religious traditions, including Christianity. Thus, it is not religious eclecticism that Panikkar argues for, but rather a form of corporate creative religious consciousness which is dictated by the pulsations of time's moving forward. The entire history of religions points to a culmination in which the particular and often exclusive claims of the individual religious traditions will be suspended in favor of a total universal outlook to which all of the religions — and not least Christianity — can make a significant contribution.

Some of these emphases were present in *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*, Panikkar's doctoral dissertation. Using language appropriate to a pre-Vatican II era, he sought here to identify a "hidden force" moving through Hinduism which was tending toward "full disclosure." He identified Christ as that hidden force — the underlying principle — that motivates the Hindu religion, even though this fact had not yet been made apparent to many Christians or Hindus. It pleased and excited Panikkar to be able to announce that the dramatic disclosure is occurring in the encounter between the two religions. He saw his own task to be that of assisting to help lift the veil, as it were, so that "the unveiled truth may be ready to receive the revealed fulness of Christ." In this book, Christ is portrayed as "the fulness of religion and thus the real perfection of every religion." Similarly, one of the functions of Christianity is to help "fill out" (as Panikkar himself wants to "lift the veil") Hindu religious truths. The Hindu tradition is in need of such complementarity. Christianity needs it too, in striving to be genuinely universal and fully catholic. From the point of view of Christian interests, the process of explication not only lends extension and coherence to Hinduism, but is also necessary to the development of a non-parochial self-identity.

Panikkar conceived part of his work to be similar to St. Thomas Aquinas' when the latter had to translate the tenets of Christian faith into Aristotelian categories of thought. Of course, for Panikkar, the challenge is not Aristotelianism, but the Hindu tradition; the task, nevertheless, is to show the compatibility of the Christian gospel with a previously hostile or alien universe of discourse.

Panikkar's thesis is dramatic: the Hindu religion is more compatible

with the Christian religion — if for no other reason than that both of them are religion — than Aristotelian philosophy is compatible with Christian theology. Thus, the ties between the two religions are intrinsic, and there is ample basis for meaningful dialogue between their adherents or representatives. Through the dialogue — either between two or more advocates, or the dialogue within oneself — adherents of both religions will be led to mutually beneficial insights. The same exposure will bring both religions to maturer stages of development. Further, because of this fundamental intrinsic compatibility, an individual person can maintain allegiances to both sets of religious affirmations without forcing himself into indifference or the position of a relativist. Finally, though, it is a reinterpreted Christianity, transformed in its contact with Hinduism, which presides over the explicative process. Christ, hidden in Hinduism, and made manifest in Christianity, is simultaneously the fulfillment of all religions.

The analysis of the encounter of religious traditions is taken to the next step in *The Trinity and the World Religions*.¹⁸ This time, however, there is decidedly less consideration for formal schematic factors (the combination of Hindu form and Christian substance, and the like), and more attention to conceptions of deity. But the familiar pattern is repeated. Just as Christ had been presented as the end of religion (in *The Hidden Christ of Hinduism*), so now the Christian understanding of the Trinity becomes a fit means of synthesizing the disparate views of deity which are advocated, usually partially and incompletely, in the other religious traditions. Panikkar also tries to show that the prominent patterns of personal spiritual formation which are advocated by the world's religions can be correlated with the threefoldness of the Christian trinitarian conception of deity. Along the way, as is his custom, he engages in extensive reinterpretations of traditional concepts, and traces their far-flung analogical references. Eventually, analogy wins. The prime synthetic principle — Christ, the hidden vital force of Hinduism — must always be construed analogously and applied equivocally:

Christ is an ambiguous term. It can be the Greek translation of the Hebrew Messiah, or it may be the name given to Jesus of Nazareth. One may identify it with the Logos and thus with the Son or equate it with Jesus. The nomenclature that I personally would like to suggest in this connection is as follows: I would propose using the word Lord for that Principle, Being, Logos or Christ that other religious traditions call by a variety of names and to which they attach a wide range of ideas . . .

When I call this link between the finite and the infinite by the name Christ I am not presupposing its identification with Jesus of Nazareth. Even from right within Christian faith such an identification has never been asserted. . . . The reason I persist in calling it Christ is that it seems to me that phenomenologically Christ presents the fundamental characteristics of the mediator between divine and

cosmic, eternal and temporal, etc., which other religions call *Isvara*, *Tathagata*, or even Jahweh, Allah, and so on. . . .¹⁹

Panikkar's essays since the publication of *The Trinity and the World Religions* exhibit some intriguing new departures supported by a desire to approach the subject in less formal/conceptual terms. Of recent date, he seems to have embarked upon a new chapter in his career, namely, a larger and intensified viewing of the Christian religion through sensitivities nurtured in the non-Christian world. It is no longer the encounter between east and west that intrigues, but, more and more, the ways in which the west appears through eyes tutored in the east. In some of the essays gathered together in his latest book, *The Intra-Religious Dialogue*, for example, he experiments with images and metaphors, providing hints of developments that may signal a veritable transformation of tested canons of comparative theological analysis. He even plays with the possibility that religious traditions should be likened less to variant ideologies, and more to the colors of the rainbow:

The different religious traditions of mankind are like the almost infinite number of colors that appear once the divine or simply white light of reality falls on the prism of human experience: it diffracts into innumerable traditions, doctrines, and religions. Green is not yellow, Hinduism is not Buddhism, and yet at the fringes one cannot know, except by postulating it artificially, where yellow ends and green begins. (*10*, pp. xxix-xx)

Rather than having to select one or more of the colors as being true or normative, Panikkar observes:

. . . through any particular color . . . one can reach the source of the white light. Any follower of a human tradition is given the possibility of reaching his or her destination, fullness, salvation provided there is a beam of light and not sheer darkness. (*10*, p. xx)

The metaphor can even be utilized to illumine the dynamics of the encounter between religious traditions:

If two colors mix, they may sire another. Similarly, with religious traditions, the meeting of two may give birth to a new one. In point of fact, most of the known religions today are results of such mutual fecundations (Aryan-Dravidians, Jews-Greeks, Indians-Muslims, etc.). Further, it is only from an agreed point of view that we can judge one religion over against another. . . . Within the green area all will appear under that particular light. A similar object within the red area will look reddish. This model reminds us that the context is paramount in comparing 'religious truths.' (*10*, p. xx)

Then, drawing fresh insight from the metaphor of the rainbow, Panikkar returns to a reappraisal of the process of explication. This time, significantly, he associates that process with the dynamics by which colors are absorbed within a prism:

Just as the color of a body is the only color generally not absorbed by that body . . . [so] also a religion similarly absorbs all other colors and hides them in its bosom, so that its external color is in truth only its appearance, its message to the outer world, but not the totality of its nature. (10, p. xx)

The metaphor is incapable of expressing everything that belongs to the truth regarding the relationships of one religion with another, but it does offer an example of how to say that the variety of religions belongs to the beauty and richness of the human situation: since it is only the entire rainbow that provides a complete picture of the true religious dimension of Man. (10, p. xx1)

And, if the metaphor doesn't say it explicitly, the following statement surely does:

The *ultimate* religious *fact* does not lie in the realm of doctrine or even individual self-consciousness. Therefore it can — and may well — be present everywhere and in every religion, although its 'explicitation' may require varied degrees of discovery, realization, evangelization, revelation, hermeneutics, etc. And this makes it plausible that this fundamental religious *fact* may have different names, interpretations, levels of consciousness and the like, which are not irrelevant but which may be existentially equivalent for the person undergoing the concrete process of realization. (10, p. 57)

The shift in genre (from the formally conceptual to the more imaginative), the change in aspect (the viewing of things more and more from the Asian side) are in full accord with Panikkar's new perceptions regarding the diminishment of western explicatory power:

[There] is the almost self-evident fact that the Western Christian tradition seems to be exhausted, I might almost say effete, when it tries to express the Christian message in a meaningful way for our times. Only by cross-fertilization and mutual fecundation may the present state of affairs be overcome; only by stepping over present cultural and philosophical boundaries can Christian life again become creative and dynamic. (10, p. 61)

III

To be sure, there is no easy, one-dimensional way of accounting for the uniqueness of Panikkar's approach. Certainly that uniqueness is the product of the integration of a wide variety of influences and factors. The distinctiveness is also due to the fact that the process of integration is ongoing: it remains open, supple, and amenable to new turns, shifts, and transpositions. Extraordinarily significant in this respect is Panikkar's lineage. He is not only a student of religion cross-culturally, but also, in a very literal sense, is a cross-cultural person, belonging, from birth, both to the occident and the orient. Thomas Merton once said that the things one cannot put together (though they truly belong together) one must hold together until they can be put together. Raimundo Panikkar not only

holds them together, but puts them together, in his person, in his biography, if not yet in systematic intellectual form.

Then too he likes his philosophy to be accompanied by a strong transcendental beat. He is partial to terms like “analogical level” and “essential realm” and such neologisms as “ontonomy,” “iconolatry,” “ontic-intentional,” “dogmaolatry,” etc. He enjoys making up his own words, and he is fond of using the hyphen to separate syllables in key words of stress. Appropriately, he has looked to the German metaphysical schools, culminating in Heidegger and Gadamer, for insight, guidance, and reassurance.

When he turns to devotional writers, it is characteristically to the more metaphysical of the mystics and spiritual teachers. He has an affinity for the Rhinelanders (particularly Meister Eckhart), Nicholas of Cusa, Bonaventura, and, of course, for the great sixteenth century Spanish Carmelites, St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross. The spirit of this form of intelligence is completely antithetical to that, say, of William of Ockham, who strove to reduce complexities into the simplest possible truths. Panikkar has no fear about soaring into worlds beyond, indeed, worlds unknown; for he is able to create the language he needs as he goes, as he ascends, as he encircles, to name the realities he encounters.

He is a scholar, certainly a very good one, but one who has insufficient patience to record the products of his close, detailed empirical work. Until his *The Vedic Experience* was published in 1977, he had not yet produced the in-depth study of which he is surely capable; and even this large volume is more aspirational and devotional than analytical. But this is simply to recognize that he is excited most by integrative ventures. He is intent upon bringing separated worlds together. He has a passion for cross-cultural understanding because he is an opponent of fragmentation.

Thus his work hardly qualifies as history of religions. In another sense, the same work is more prolegomena to comparative religion than actual comparative religion. I mean to suggest that he writes more paragraphs and articles proposing that there be “cross-cultural religious dialogue” than illustrating how that intellectual (but, more fundamentally, religious) interest can be enacted. And, for all of his involvement in history of religions and comparative religion, he is unwilling to abandon theology. Nor does he find it necessary to make sharp distinctions between these various fields; it is almost as though one can be engaged in all of them simultaneously. Thus engaged, the scholar sorts out the various disciplines and fields in which he is involved only by stepping aside, momentarily, to make of such sortings an inquiry of its own. He would disagree with me, I am sure, but I find the totality of the work to be something other than religious studies; or, if it belongs and pertains, it is as the subject matter of that analysis rather than as substance of it.

But there is yet another background and temperamental factor which

functions as an important indicator of Panikkar's most valued working context. And this is his mystical apprehension of the nature of reality. He is simply immersed in mystical sensibilities, mystical forms of categorization, mystical apprehension, and contemplative patterns of discipline. As a result, his scholarship is largely a product of the transposition of mystical aspirations into methodological — yes, methodological — objectives.

This fact doesn't explain, but it does significantly illumine his penchant for cross-cultural dialogue. It is no embellished ecumenical motivation that leads him in this direction, nor any "spaceship earth" — "we're all in this together" — anxieties. Indeed, he can proceed hardly mentioning specific events at all, and without referring to current socio-political urgencies. The truth is that the basis from which he starts — a transcendental, mystical apprehension of the world — is already cross-cultural. It is cross-cultural by implication of its definition, because it is also trans-cultural. Indeed, the mystical writers to whom Panikkar is indebted are those for whom there is a comprehensive grasp of both the unity and totality of things. It is fitting that the mystical writers should enunciate cross-cultural bridges, for mysticism seems to be a permanent feature of religion; it is not the peculiar possession of any single religious tradition.

I have suggested, therefore, that it is with certain metaphysically-minded mystics that Panikkar feels most at home. This is a true and eminently defensible suggestion, I feel confident. But now I want to be a bit bolder and propose that the clue to the uniqueness of Panikkar's thought is his rather specific devotion to the women mystics of late medieval times. I refer to his fondness for the writings of Catherine of Genoa, Catherine of Sienna, Angela of Folino, and, of course, St. Teresa of Avila. I can make little more of the correspondence than to name it and confess that I find it intriguing. Were I probing deeper, I might test the thesis that these mystical writers are of special interest because they combine a capacity for disciplined interior reflexivity, while seeming to speak from those regions of fulness, fecundity, and creative unity which abide prior to the onset of the need for the explicatory process. It isn't much more than this — except the facility to express it in philosophical terms — that Panikkar seeks from his engagement with the works of Heidegger, Gadamer, and other examples of metaphysically-directed continental philosophy. I confess to viewing his chances of victory in this area to be of minor importance when placed alongside the intricate interweaving of cross-cultural strands that has occurred already. And I wonder if German philosophy isn't the anomaly in the blend. I believe this is the reason the confidence his position ought to exhibit seems, paradoxically, to be placed in suspense waiting upon the outcome of issues with which it has only a constructed and nearly arbitrary affinity. The translation of a perennial mystical orientation into twentieth century religious

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of fresh symbols of the Truth, in the freedom of the Spirit which relativizes all other claims on our religious allegiance.

If I were to sum up how I presently see Panikkar's thought, I would have to say that its central symbol is the Christ. The story in which this symbol becomes meaningful is an appropriation of Hindu and Christian myths. What this gives rise to is an original expression of Christian thought which challenges us, not to say "Amen" to it, but to go on in our own thinking in a way that is consistent with the tradition of which we are a part. Panikkar has chosen to speak meaningfully rather than vacuously by self-consciously affirming his Christian standpoint. If the truth lies at the intersection of our utterances, then I believe that he has made the right choice, indeed the only choice open to one who breaks silence. He has followed through consistently on one live option before us. And this it seems to me is the most fruitful way to go about developing religious thought in a crosscultural milieu. For our task surely is not to compute how many pundits we can balance on the point of a needle. It is to open up ever new lines of thought on the truth which meets us in our moments of deep encounter. Raimundo Panikkar aids in liberating our thinking by articulating his own sense of freedom from the perspective of a Hindu encounter with the Christ.

FOOTNOTES

¹See F.J. Streng, "Studying Religion: Possibilities and Limitations of Different Definitions," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 40 (1972), pp. 219–237, esp. 235.

²*Symbolism of Evil*, tr. E. Buchanan, Harper & Row, New York, 1967, p. 309–310.

³See John S. Dunne, *A Search For God In Time And Memory*, Macmillan, New York, 1969, e.g. p. 25.

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genre seems, by contrast, to be the primary objective and the lasting achievement. The ingenious transformation of conceptual, methodological, and fundamental religious matters that occurs is forceful evidence of the vitality of the tradition from which Raimundo Panikkar draws his inspiration. But that it can become both global and primordial in the process is witness to his own capacity for creative and intuitive reconstruction.

NOTES

¹Karl Rahner, S.J., *Theological Investigations*, Vol. V, translated by Karl H. Kruger (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1966), pp. 115–134. ²*Ibid.*, p. 118. ³*Ibid.*, p. 121.

⁴*Ibid.* ⁵*Ibid.*, p. 125. ⁶*Ibid.*, p. 131. ⁷*Ibid.*, p. 132. ⁸*Ibid.*, p. 133. ⁹*Ibid.*, p. 134.

¹⁰*Ibid.* ¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 134.

¹²Jean Daniélou, "The Transcendence of Christianity," chap. 9 of *Introduction to the Great Religions* (Notre Dame: Fides Publishers, Inc., 1964), pp. 149–159. Quotation is taken from p. 152. ¹³*Ibid.*, p. 154. ¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 155. ¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 156. ¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 157.

¹⁷The clearest sign of this capacity is Panikkar's large interpretive volume on the Vedic scriptures, *The Vedic Experience* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1977), on which he worked for more than a decade in the midst of his reflections on philosophical and theological issues.

¹⁸Panikkar, *The Trinity and the World Religions. Icon – Person – Mystery* (Madras: The Christian Literature Society, 1970). Page references here pertain to the Madras edition, but see Panikkar bibliography, 2.

¹⁹Panikkar, *ibid.*, p. 51, 52.