Intra-religious Dialogue and Silence in the Life of Raimon Panikkar

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From the time he began to write until the end of his life, Raimon Panikkar explored the nature, foundations and characteristics of “religion.” His theological investigations were marked by his search for his own religious identity. He was an Indian and a Catalan, born of a Hindu father and a Catholic mother. In his theology, which was deeply rooted in the Anselmian tradition of “faith seeking understanding,” he explored his own Christian faith through the lens of Hinduism and later through Buddhism. His theological exploration led him to recognize that he arrived in India as a Christian, lived there as a Hindu, and returned to Europe as a Buddhist. While he may be better known for his work *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*, his extensive opus, now published by Orbis Books in the collection *Raimon Panikkar Opera Omnia* (OO), under the editorial direction of Milena Carrara Pavan, brings together in a comparative manner his original contribution to interreligious dialogue and his understanding of religions.

Panikkar’s theological reflection arose out of a deep contemplative life and his desire to bring people of different faiths together so that they might understand and appreciate each other. This paper explores firstly some of his theological contributions to the understanding of religion, the multi-religious, and the “intra-religious,” and secondly, some of the contributions he made to the “intra-religious” sphere, in particular through his study of the *Mantramanjari* during the twelve years he spent in Varanasi on the Ganges (OO IV.1 1964-1976).

Intra-religious Dialogue

In addition trying to determine his own religious identity, Panikkar asked questions that remain central to the limitations and openings of dialogue, questions that he first asked of himself. His responses to those questions slowly led him to become a mystic, a contemplative, a monk. Among his questions were “How can a Christian understand a Hindu if he does not become a Hindu?” and “How can a Hindu enter into the world of Christian belief if he does not somehow hold as true that same belief?”¹ In Panikkar’s understanding of the religious self,

the belief of the believer belongs essentially to the religious phenomenon; the *noëma* of religion is not an objectified *creditum* or a hypothetical credendum but entails an unbreakable link with the *credens*. The belief of the believer remains opaque for the observer until in one way or another it also becomes the *creed* of the observer.²

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¹ Raimon Panikkar, *Opera Omnia* vol. I.1, p. 52.
² Raimon Panikkar, *Opera Omnia* vol. I.1, p. 52-53.
In order for dialogue to take place, these limitations of space and time have to be overcome. Panikkar proposes contemplation, which he understands as an act of “being consciously in the world,” as the way to overcome spatiotemporal categories. Following the mystical traditions of the world religions, Panikkar argued strongly that “contemplation is the actual building of the temple of reality, wherein the onloooker is equally part and parcel of the whole construction.” Thus, contemplation is not an experiment; it is an experience, an ontological phenomenon. One must remember at all times that Panikkar was not satisfied with the division of the world into the natural and the rational. He was even less satisfied with understanding a human being as a rational animal. He assumed that human beings “mirror the whole makrokosmos” so that “the distinction between image and likeness is more theological than lexical.”

Thus, Panikkar was not satisfied with understanding a human being as a spirit imprisoned in a body, a division put forward by Descartes and that contradicts the biblical understanding of what it means to be human. I would argue, expanding on Panikkar’s thought, that the Christian belief that Christ’s death, resurrection, and anticipated return poses a real challenge to an absolute rationalism that the reformers in the sixteenth century could not solve. Interreligious dialogue led Panikkar to propose that the world of human and divine mysticism could be considered and understood as an integral part of the “rational animal.” For Panikkar, mysticism provides a corrective to a Cartesian understanding of human beings and helps us avoid reducing a human being to a “rational, if not rationalist, biped and human life to the supremacy of reason.”

By including mysticism within human existence and seeing it as an essential part of human life, Panikkar opened the way for an encounter with the mysticism of Hinduism and Buddhism. Mysticism for Panikkar is “the experience of Life” rather than its interpretation. It is a complete and not fragmentary experience. Moreover, Panikkar found the coming together of mysticism and spirituality to be the most important theme of his life. It was the reason that he made Mysticism and Spirituality volume I of his completed works, offering it as his own intellectual and spiritual autobiography and

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4 Raimon Panikkar, Opera Omnia vol. I.1, p. 53.
5 Raimon Panikkar, Opera Omnia vol. I.1, p. 53.
6 Raimon Panikkar, Opera Omnia vol. I.1, p. 53. Further elaboration of Panikkar’s thought on these issues of reason and contemplation can be found in Raimon Panikkar, Opera Omnia vol. I.1 Section III: The Mystical Experience, Part II: The Supreme Experience: The Ways of East and West, particularly in chapter 13: The Ways of East and West, pp. 247-269 at pp. 263-269.
describing it as “the most important theme of my life.”\textsuperscript{11} Indeed, years later, some of those involved in Christian-Hindu dialogue came to realize, following Panikkar, that there could be a non-dual consciousness in both Hinduism and Christianity, a consciousness of full unity between the divine and the human located within the mystical experience of meditation.\textsuperscript{12} Indeed, it was diversity in religion that led Panikkar to an experience of intra-religious dialogue and of unity.

\textbf{Towards a Diversity of Language}

Throughout his stay in India as well as during his academic career, Panikkar wrote on Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism as he explored the possibilities of “the experience of Life” within the different world religions. His approach to religious diversity focused on the centrality of the third dimension of human Life, the mystical dimension. While studying and praying in Benares (Varanasi), the holy city of the Hindus, he followed a path that was different from those of his European contemporaries who were also living in India. His friend Abhishiktananda followed the Hindu path of renunciation and solitude; Bede Griffiths chose to be surrounded by disciples in a Christian ashram; Francis Mahieu remained within the rule of life of a Christian monastic in a community that developed a particular Eastern rite of liturgical celebration.\textsuperscript{13}

Panikkar explored the centrality of the mystical experience by using different and varied mystical languages. While Bede Griffiths was not considered a theologian in European circles because he could not use the language of reason to communicate his experience, Panikkar managed to explore the general theme of Life through the established tools of thought, history, and writing. In this way, he was able to speak to a theological world that he believed fell short of the engagement he was proposing. That larger academic and ecclesial world did not necessarily agree with him, but he was regarded as an academic and a theologian who could use the language of reason to speak of his mystical experiences.\textsuperscript{14}

Nevertheless, Panikkar did not engage with the “canonical” writings of European scholars on interreligious dialogue. Instead, as a Catholic priest, he taught in secular universities in the United States and lived for years in Varanasi, where he was sheltered from the scrutiny of those who distrusted personal experience and bypassed actual engagement with other religions in their places of origin, such as India.


\textsuperscript{14} For example, Panikkar was invited to deliver the prestigious Gifford Lectures at the University of Edinburgh that were later published as Raimon Panikkar, \textit{The Rhythm of Being: The Unbroken Trinity}, Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2010.
Panikkar’s mystical experience of Life was first diversified and then unified by his coming into contact with different experiences of and different languages for the diverse human experience of opening the life of the soul. Mysticism expressed in prayer became for Panikkar a unifying force that led human beings to find peace in the realization that different languages were united in a common purpose: the touching of the Infinite in a single point.\(^\text{15}\) For Panikkar, the human location for such an encounter has less importance than the encounter itself. A human being can meet the Infinite in a single point by using different languages:

Am I in Hindūism or Christianity?
Or am I rather Buddhist?
Why these labels in the field of prayer?
Yes, I can pray in many languages.\(^\text{16}\)

As Panikkar developed these ideas, he relied on neither the senses nor reason but on spiritual experience. Thus, when delivering the Gifford Lectures he argued that spiritual experience produces spiritual knowledge, which is “based neither on any postulate nor on any logical operation derived from other principles. It is immediate self-refulgent luminosity (svayamprakāśa), which is not based on any ulterior principle.”\(^\text{17}\) Thus, once again he challenged the Cartesian principle of non-contradiction that has dominated the paradigms of a European philosophical theology. For Panikkar, “Cogito, ergo sum ([I] think, therefore [I] am) is a paradigm of rational evidence, which lies in the ergo. The ergo is the power of reason.”\(^\text{18}\) The mystical experience acquired by Panikkar, and certainly influenced by journeys and conversations with Abhishiktananda and Bede Griffiths, led him to revisit the large histories and experiences of Hinduism and Buddhism while deepening his conviction that the location of the principle of non-contradiction resides within a European context and within the human activities of reason and theology.

Panikkar used the metaphor of looking through a window to describe the absolute necessity of realizing that one’s religious experience is limited.\(^\text{19}\) Reality is out there, and the perceptions of one person are different from those of another. The experience of looking through a window becomes humbling as one realizes that not everything can be seen through a window. Moreover, one must rely on the possible explanations of another person. Thus, the basis of human life is silence: one listens to the experience of others, one is enriched by others, and at the same time one enriches

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\(^{16}\) Raimon Panikkar, Opera Omnia vol. I.1, p. 273.

\(^{17}\) Raimon Panikkar, The Rhythm of Being, p. 240.

\(^{18}\) Ibid.

others through one’s experience. However, in listening to the religious experiences of others, one also comes to the realization that the knowledge attained solely through the intellect is to be situated at a lower level.

In his writings, Panikkar dwells extensively on the vocation of the monk. He struggles at times with the etymology and history of the word, but he assumes that he is himself a monk. He understands that “perfection” can be acquired through many different vocations because he sees the monk as an archetype of the “humanum” who wants to transcend the materiality of life. Thus, for Panikkar “inasmuch as we try to unify our lives around the center, all of us have something of the monk in us.” The spiritual aims of a monk are those of all humanity, and therefore monasticism transcends a specific vocation or activity within a particular world religion, and even within the life of an atheist. This vocation “is basically human and primordially [a] religious one.” Panikkar’s thought on monastic interreligious dialogue can be summarized in the following citation:

To speak of a Buddhist monk or a Hindu monk or a Jaina monk or a Christian monk does violence to the words. The Christian, the Buddhist, the Jaina . . . are only qualifications of the search for that center, for that core that any monk seeks.

In the 1960s, Panikkar was somewhat critical of a structured monastic life of silence because he had been heavily influenced by his experience of Hinduism in which silence and pilgrimage, rather than silence and stability, are the norm. The Hindu practitioner is always on the move in search of ritual moments and experiences of the divine. Thus, he wrote,

21 Raimon Panikkar, Opera Omnia vol. I.2, section II: The Path of the Monk, chapter 7: The Archetype of the Monk, pp. 133-144 at p. 137.
22 Raimon Panikkar, Opera Omnia vol. I.2, p. 137.
23 Raimon Panikkar, Opera Omnia vol. I.2, p. 137.
24 Panikkar writes, “I am not against institutions … but I would like to make the distinction between institutions and institutionalism,” in Raimon Panikkar, Opera Omnia vol. I.2, p. 140. He goes on to say, “the monastery, then, would not be the “establishment” of the monks, but the schola Domini, the school where that human dimension is cultivated and transmitted.” In Raimon Panikkar, Opera Omnia vol. I.2, p. 141.
25 Even before his Indian experience, Bede Griffiths proposed the possibility that monastic activities might actually be devoid of contemplation because of their natural movement and noise and had argued that “contemplation is a habit of mind which enables the soul to keep in a state of recollection in the presence of God whatever may be the work with which we are occupied.” In Bede Griffiths, The Golden String: An Autobiography, Tucson, AZ: Medio Media Publishing, 2003, p. 143.
The silence of Life is not the same as a life of silence, the silent life of the monks, of a hermitage [but] the silence of Life is the art of making silent the activities of life (that are not Life), in order to reach the pure experience of Life.\footnote{Panikkar, \textit{Opera Omnia} vol. I.2, p. 13.}

For Panikkar, a historical investigation of the universal archetype of monkhood did not help because it addressed the examples of the past rather than the challenges of the present.\footnote{Panikkar’s reflections were triggered by an invitation to chair a conference in 1980 in the United States organized by the North American Board for East-West Dialogue, a subcommittee of Aide Inter-Monastères, see \textit{Opera Omnia} vol. I.2, section II: The Path of the Monk, Part One: Blessed Simplicity: The Challenge of Being a Monk, “Introduction,” pp. 121-127.} The reason monasticism continues to be an archetype of human life and not a copy of the past is because Panikkar takes “the monastic ideal as the human archetype who has always wanted to overcome banality, insisting particularly on the vertical dimension of life (\textit{zōē}, rather than \textit{bios}), as an antidote to a superficial existence.”\footnote{Panikkar, \textit{Opera Omnia} vol. I.2, section II, Part One, “Introduction,” p. 122.}

Panikkar develops his thesis with what he calls a nine-aphorism rebuilding of the whole human being using “ancient forms of wisdom” that he cites and then comments on in contemporary terms.\footnote{Panikkar, \textit{Opera Omnia} vol. I.2, section II, Part One, “Introduction,” p. 122.} The complexity of the aphorisms comes from the fact that Panikkar uses different traditions within and outside the Judeo-Christian tradition and that his “bridge-head” of rationality, using Robin Horton’s sense of a cross-cultural understanding, suggests a common humanity rather than the traditional Christian notion that Christ is the fulfilment and ideal of humanity.\footnote{For some helpful notes on Panikkar’s hermeneutical method see Fabrice Blée, “La relation comme clef herméneutique dans l’œuvre de Raimon Panikkar,” \textit{Dilatato Corde} IV/2, June-December 2014.} For Panikkar, the Christ of the cosmos is the foundation for a theological anthropology in which the \textit{pantokrator}, the Christ of all that is created, is henceforth represented in all religions, showing that “God is at work in all religions: the Christian \textit{kerygma} does not proclaim a new God, but the \textit{mirabilia} of God, of which the mystery of Christ hidden in God is the \textit{alpha} and \textit{omega}.”\footnote{Eph. 3:9; Rom. 16:25 in Raimundo Panikkar, \textit{The Unknown Christ of Hinduism}, p. 168.} Divine revelation is received in the context of human limitations (\textit{quidquid recipitur ad modum recipientis recipitur}).\footnote{Raimon Panikkar, \textit{Christophany: The Fullness of Man}, Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2004, p. 3.}

The first aphorism proposed by Panikkar and relevant to our discussion is “to rediscover the value, or better, the centrality of silence.”\footnote{Panikkar, \textit{Opera Omnia} vol. I.2, section II, Part One, “Introduction,” p. 122.} Such an aphorism becomes central in the recreation of a better humanity symbolized by the monk as archetype and symbol (not model) of silence, and therefore of Life. For Panikkar, many societies
in Africa, Asia, and Europe describe silence as a spatiotemporal condition at the beginning of time. Therefore, for Panikkar, the expression “In the beginning was the Word” is not a claim that the Word is the beginning. Rather, “the Beginning is Silence, the Void, Non-Being, the Abyss, Darkness, or other symbols in many other traditions.”³⁴ Panikkar recognizes that “The Word is not silent and it is not silence,” but he goes on to argue that “the true word emerges from the silence, ‘shattering’ it, going beyond it, overcoming it. . . . Silence doesn’t speak, it says nothing, but it makes the saying possible; silence inspires it, since it dwells there.”³⁵ It is Panikkar’s assumption that the person who has not experienced silence is not able to accommodate others because in non-silence such a person experiences the world and reality in a way that becomes sectarian and non-inclusive.

In writing and speaking about the potential new monk who is tainted by secularism and by noise, Panikkar returned to the Indian tradition and focused on the rules for a disciple rather than those for a master, because the disciple is the one who asks questions about the experience of monastic and contemplative life rather than the master. Panikkar proposed nine sūtras:³⁶

1. The Breakthrough of the Primordial Aspiration
2. The Primacy of Being over Doing and Having
3. Silence over the Word
4. Mother Earth Prior to the Fellowship of Men
5. Overcoming Spatiotemporal Parameters
6. Transitional Consciousness above Historical Concern
7. The Fullness of The Person Rather Than of the Individual
8. The Primacy of the Holy
9. The Memory of the Ultimate and of His Constant Presence.³⁷

Silence over the Word
Panikkar proposes the primacy of silence over the Word by arguing that it is in silence that reality is united because “silence is one, words are many.”³⁸ His Indian experience suggests that “those who listen to the silence out of which the word emerges often have no need of words, and from those who have not discovered this silence the very word will conceal it” so that “the three yogas, mind, speech, and body, progressively

³⁴ Ibid.
³⁶ Sanskrit – “yarn, thread of a fabric,” short aphorism requiring an explanation and that can be easily memorized.
³⁷ Panikkar, Opera Omnia vol. I.2, section II, chapter 8: “The Canon of the Disciple,” p. 156. His gloss an commentary on each of these sūtras take up the next 40 pages.
This silence is central to the search for human fulfillment and divine encounter. Silence unites not only the life of the Christian monk but also the commonality of all monks in their search for and actualization of transcendence in the different traditions.

In his writings on Hindu monks, Panikkar points to the wisdom of the Bhagavad-Gītā when in his *Le moine selon les écritures saintes de l’hindouisme* he begins with the following passage of the Gītā:

Inspired sages called *samnyāsa*
The actual abandonment of interested actions
Erudite people define “renunciation” [tyāga]
The abandonment of the fruits of any type of action [Bhagavad-Gītā XVIII.2].

At the start of a Hindu monk’s life, “renunciation is the pinnacle of sacrifice.” However, sacrifice and renunciation cease to be as the monk remains in the silence of the self because his personality, his “I,” slowly ceases to exist so that “not only does he renounce everything, but also his own I and the renunciation itself.” Panikkar further reminds us that in India the ascetic does not represent renunciation; rather he is “an example of a pure life stripped of everything.” He represents the centrality of a philosophy of life that is accessible to every person. Thus, the ancient āśramic tradition allowed husbands, and sometimes wives, to withdraw into the forest after having performed their duties within society, dedicating “themselves to a life of renunciation in search of the Absolute.”

Panikkar breaks with the traditional understanding of the monk as a perfect human being by adding another characteristic, that of social disruption and madness. The monk rebels against the social norms that dictate an engagement with space and time and becomes a mad person who transcends norms, orders, and spatial-temporal categories. Thus, Panikkar writes,

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42 Panikkar, *Opera Omnia* vol. I.2, section II, chapter 8, p. 234.
43 Panikkar, *Opera Omnia* vol. I.2, section II, chapter 8, p. 234, cf. the third āśrama: the vānaprastha, or state of the forest-dweller in Mānava-dharmasāstra VI.2.
His [the monk’s] function consists in collaborating directly with the Gods: he is their partner. His outward appearance reveals his vocation and the sincerity of his life. He lives anywhere, he feels at home in the East and the West, he is a universal man; but the price of all of this is that he probably ceases to be a normal person.\textsuperscript{44}

The prophetic signs offered by Hindu monks relate then to their challenge to lead a life in which the philosophical principle that shapes Hindu life—that of the renunciation founded in knowledge—brings the discovery that materiality is only a pseudo-value and that Life (with a capital “L”) is the discovery of an everyday renunciation. The three periods of Hindu Scriptures, that is, their formulation in the Vedic period, their further elaboration in the Upanishads, and their ritual and symbolic explanation in the Bhagavad-Gītā, correspond to the historical and textual development of asceticism. Within the Vedic period, asceticism was not central to Hindu practice; it was tolerated. During the period of the Upanishads, renunciation became “a means, a way therefore to reach the supreme goal, not for evasion or for escape, but for internalization and passing beyond.”\textsuperscript{45}

According to Panikkar, there are two ways of understanding renunciation in the third period. It is either seen as the abandonment of one value in favor of another value that is deemed higher, or as the abandonment of value altogether, because the person discovers that there is no value in value. The development of an interior world that embraces the worries of an exterior and material world develops from the Upanishads. However, the interior perception of the monk also acquires two different possibilities: to embrace a Life that becomes the truth or to embrace life through the appearance of things. Life for Panikkar is a higher ideal than life as a moral value. As Panikkar notes,

Two currents are mixed in the idea of the samnyāsin, the monk, the acosmic ascetics who has renounced everything.
The first is the moral perfection of the one who always tells the truth, who has perfect control of his passions who is full of compassion and love . . . . The second is the sadhu, the man who immediately goes to the goal and who finds himself beyond all the limits imposed on other people, be they in the moral, social, physical or intellectual field.\textsuperscript{46}

However, there is still an imbalance between pure inaction and action in the world, an imbalance that finds an equilibrium in the Bhagavad-Gītā, which expresses the notion that “The authentic yogin, the complete Man, is not the acosmic monk who tends to be an ideal of inaction and “un-tie,” which proves absolutely impossible.”\textsuperscript{47} The final understandings that have shaped the contemporary Hindu monk, according to

\textsuperscript{44} Panikkar, Opera Omnia vol. I.2, section II, chapter 8, p. 236.
\textsuperscript{45} Panikkar, Opera Omnia vol. I.2, section II, chapter 8, p. 235.
\textsuperscript{46} Panikkar, Opera Omnia vol. I.2, section II, chapter 8, pp. 238-239.
\textsuperscript{47} Panikkar, Opera Omnia vol. I.2, section II, chapter 8, p. 242.
Panikkar, suggest that “the complete Man is simultaneously yukta, connected to entire reality, committed in the network of human relationships, and vimukta, free, freed of everything.”

**Christian-Hindu Dialogue**

The following reflections arise from Panikkar’s contribution to the understanding of a dialogue that has an initial point of departure in the shared premises of the monk. In them, I concentrate on a post-textual reflection on Christian-Hindu dialogue. Taking the foundations of dialogue proposed by Panikkar, I offer my own reading of some textual instances in which silence becomes points to the possibility of encounter and offers a way of entering into it. These arguments for silence within a wider interreligious dialogue can also be applied to the textual richness of Buddhism, a task to be expanded elsewhere and that I have initiated somewhere else in text and *in loco*.

It is important to note that Panikkar’s life-project was not a European theological one based on reason but an Eastern mystical one based on experience. Thus, his reflections on silence, monks, and renunciation are made in the light of mysticism in that mysticism “seems to go in a direction contrary to that of thought: not toward Being (as though we were dealing with a rediscovery or a redemption of Being) but starting from Being, as if it were a dissipation (or a sacrifice) of Being.” As previously stated, Panikkar emphasizes that the Word is at the beginning as a premise for speaking. Silence precedes it, so for him “all mysticism is nothing other than a pro-logos: something that comes before the logos.”

Renunciation and asceticism are understood in terms of social exclusion (in the Vedas) and of personal choice and inclusion (in the Bhagavad-Gītā). It should be mentioned that the Hindu Scriptures are non-canonical. Hinduism as such does not have one stream of practice or one stream of theoretical understanding, but many. The multiplicity of practices and understanding are related to the many gods who express the absoluteness of Brahman. The Gītā, a dialogue between the Lord Krishna and Arjuna that takes place on a battlefield, initiates a project of self-realization, of self-

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52 Thus, for Panikkar, false mysticism “arises when it becomes a “pro-logos” where the logos should be, and taking the place of the logos.” See Panikkar, *Opera Omnia* vol. I.1, “A PROLOGUE INSTEAD OF AN EPILOGUE,” pp. xxi-xxv, at p. xxi.
mastery, that brings with it right action, action that involves mental discipline and choice and that benefits others. In the explanation provided by Eknath Easwaran, “work hard in the world without any selfish attachment, the Gita counsels, and you will purify your consciousness of self-will.”

The questions of the Gītā could be considered common to all humanity because the challenges faced by Arjuna towards his kin and family are the challenges faced by all who are asked to perform duty before renunciation. The socio-temporal difficulties faced by Arjuna are the same faced by those who encounter practitioners of other religions. How can I be located within one or the other group if my sense of duty and allegiance to the Absolute make me want to be with both of them, three of them, or many of them? Therefore, Krishna instructs Arjuna, “The impermanent has no reality; reality lies in the eternal. Those who have seen the boundary between these two have attained the end of all knowledge.” And: “As one abandons worn-out clothes and acquires new ones, so when the body is worn out a new one is acquired by the Self, who lives within.” Therefore, Krishna continues, “the self cannot be pierced by weapons or burned by fire. . . . it is everlasting and infinite, standing on the motionless foundations of eternity.” Those foundations are described as mysticism in contemplation: “not deluded by pride, free from selfish attachment and selfish desire, beyond the duality of pleasure and pain, ever aware of the Self, the wise go forward to that eternal goal.” Thus, with regard to renunciation, the body acts as a vehicle of encounter so that “as long as one has a body, one cannot renounce action altogether. True renunciation is giving up all desire for personal reward.”

I would argue that Panikkar’s thought is so widely comprehensive of East and West that his contribution to interreligious dialogue creates two large axes of encounter and ongoing hermeneutical lineamenta that need to be expanded in a larger work. Panikkar associates rational theology and the Word with a self-contained European context; he considers mysticism (which includes silence) and silence as divine attributes, as components of the East. If the first axis corresponds to the dual qualities of experience/mysticism, reality/nothingness and needs to be mediated by the inter-cultural experience of the other (East/West), the second axis of interreligious

54 Bhagavad-Gītā II.16.
55 Bhagavad-Gītā II.22.
57 Bhagavad-Gītā XV.5.
58 Bhagavad-Gītā XVIII.11.
59 “The “fatigue [tension] of concept” needs to be overcome in the Spirit in order to clear up the numerous misunderstandings and to promote cross-fertilization between these two great traditions of humanity.” See Panikkar, Opera Omnia vol. I.1, Section II: Contemplation, chapter 6: “The Origin: Silence,” pp. 75-91 at p. 77.
dialogue arises out of mysticism rather than theology. Thus, mysticism is an activity of silence open to all human beings. In Panikkar’s words, “Mysticism should not be seen as the special province of the few but rather as one essential dimension of humankind.”

The other realities of faith that are seen across a river can only be accessed by a contemplative vision in which reason and knowledge disappear and the body is left behind. Contemplation alone provides the ultimate encounter with the Absolute.

All humanity is capable of meeting in contemplation before uttering words of understanding. The monk relates such contemplative experience not by actions or teachings but by dwelling in the field of the Absolute where the absolute negation of reason and understanding provide the means for encounter. It is not difficult to understand the easy dialogue with Hindus that took place when Panikkar and Abhishiktananda contemplated the rising of the sun beside the river as they chanted the Upanishads or when Abhishiktananda met a sādhu beside the river and both smiled at each other in silence, waving their hands in the joy of mystically recognizing a common purpose that had no purpose other than the experience the Absolute [the Lord].

One may ask, why then is there need for words? In the Indian tradition, there are indeed silent munis who are vowed to mauna (silence). With Panikkar, I argue that monastic interchange seems rightly to recognize that words arising from silence are quite powerful. Silence becomes the essence of being; however, silence provides a creative utterance of words in a non-literal sense, words that come out of the symbolic speaking of a body located within a landscape, within a presence, a bodily presence of the Absolute. For Panikkar “the human tongue must remain silent; every logos is insufficient by itself,” and further, “in order to grasp the living reality of symbols, we need the third eye.”

Bodily presence in silence is what united the universal monk-ness of Panikkar, Abhishiktananda, and Bede Griffiths. Panikkar ended his days as a monk-theologian reflecting on a variety of common and diverse experiences, Abhishiktananda developed as a monk-ascetic devoid of community and devoid of an ashram while Griffiths lived the same monastic silence with disciples and visitors. Within the life of an ashram, silence and words coexisted in creative communal tension.

The writings of Panikkar call attention to the ways that the mystical experience of the Absolute has been shaped within Christianity and Hinduism. His analysis has challenging implications for the dialogue between East and West, and particularly for

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monastic dialogue. Mystical experiences are not shaped by methods of spiritual practice, but by the power of the Spirit, the illumination of a fire that, as in the case of Abhishiktananda, takes the human body, empties it, and opens the heart and the soul to a non-duality, to the reality of what Panikkar called Life.63

Panikkar’s writings and his own contemplative life challenged the Christian and the Hindu to come together in those moments when, though separated corporeally, they sit together in meditation united in the possibility of renouncing a material Word to share the emptiness and fullness of silence. Panikkar’s notion of the primacy of contemplation brings about the possibility and the ultimate “danger” that in dialoguing with one another, Christians and Hindus could become transformed into different persons by the insights and contemplative ways known to both Christianity and Hinduism. The reason self-realization is so central to Panikkar’s own selfhood may be that he was raised within both traditions. What is obvious for him becomes a challenge to others. However, for those who have followed this path of renunciation and contemplation, embracing a mystical, philosophical, and spiritual challenge becomes the central paradigm of a possible interreligious dialogue that takes place within oneself. Panikkar wrote about this possible self-understanding through another religious tradition in terms of reaching the realm of true contemplation:

In order to understand others as they understand themselves, I have to become the other—that is, share in their experience, participate in their particular world, be converted to their way of life. How can a Christian understand a Hindu if he does not become a Hindu? A Christian may perhaps understand a kind of objectified Hinduism, but this does not tally with what the Hindu accepts and believes as his Hinduism. Living Hinduism is constitutively linked with the Hindu understanding of it, which includes the Hindu’s self-understanding.64

It is within this option of becoming the other that sacred texts within Hinduism shape the possibility of many Hinduisms across time and space.65 If the Vedas brought the possibility of systematic ordering of the Hindu way of life and the Bhagavad-Gītā assumed human choices within self-realization, it is within the many Upanishads that a general Hindu self-understanding developed within what the West has called a Hindu philosophy. If, as Clooney argues, reason has been used to provide a bridge of

63 Abhishiktananda wrote, “This is the unique experience of kevala, of the Absolute, of Alone-ness, the experience of the infinite Alone-ness of God; not of alone-ness with God, nor alone-ness in God, but of the Alone infinitely and essentially Alone, the alone-ness that is the Alone-ness of God.” In Swami Abhishiktananda: Essential Writings, Shirley Du Boulay, ed, Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2006, p. 149.


understanding between Christian and Hindu theology, I would suggest that the praying and meditation of the Upanishads, as well as the use of reason, becomes a possible way of journeying together in interreligious dialogue.\textsuperscript{66} For example, “Behold the universe in the glory of God: and all that lives and moves on earth. Leaving the transient, find joy in the Eternal: set not your heart on another’s possession.”\textsuperscript{67} And, “the pure eternal Spirit dwells in the castle of eleven gates of the body. By ruling this castle, man is free from sorrows and, free from all bondage, attains liberation.”\textsuperscript{68}

**Reading in Benares**

To make his intra-religious dialogue with Hinduism meaningful, Panikkar spent ten years beside the Ganges studying and translating Hindu texts. For him, such exercise was not a mere rational and reasonable exercise of understanding but a leap into intra-religious dialogue through mysticism. Indeed, throughout the rest of his life, the contemplative Panikkar spent every morning meditating and translating texts in order to be faithful to his own understanding of mysticism as “the experience of Life” rather than its interpretation, mysticism as a complete and not fragmentary experience.\textsuperscript{69}

If Panikkar’s justification for his isolation in Benares over so many years came later and when he was not there any longer, he set off on his initial journey into Hinduism because he had to make the difficult choice between acting in the world and acquiring knowledge to act later. He used the poignant metaphor of a house on fire when he asked himself if he should save a precious manuscript from burning in the fire or the human beings who were within the house. He was not faced with the actual choice of saving something precious from a fire, but he was challenged in his own journey with other religions to go deep into such a fire. He believed he had no choice but to discover the most precious message of a universal Hinduism that could speak to all humanity. He was not attracted to ritual practice of exclusion or to the acquisition of scientific and literary knowledge to be used for self-enrichment. Rather, what attracted him was “the fundamental insight of this book is that there is no essence without existence, no existence without an essence.”\textsuperscript{70}

For Panikkar, the sharing of the Vedas becomes a personal experience, though not a lonely one, and one that cannot be “an exploitation under the guise of scholarship and


\textsuperscript{67} *Isa Upanishad.*

\textsuperscript{68} *Katha Upanishad V.*

\textsuperscript{69} Raimon Panikkar, *Opera Omnia* vol. I.1, “Introduction,” p. xiii.

Thus, Panikkar's descent into the vault of intra-religious dialogue offers us his experience of the Vedas, an experience that cannot be reproduced but that triggers the possibility that other human beings could follow the experiential journey of the Vedas, the texts of which are chanted as mantras and therefore already have an experiential dimension. In a Hindu wedding, for example, the Vedas are chanted for hours, and those taking part in the wedding are interrogated about their own intentions, knowledge, and feelings, rather than somebody else's experiences.

For Panikkar, the rootedness of the Veda in historic-religious traditions can bring new understanding and fresh possibilities of the universal Vedic experience. Thus, in explaining why the "The Vedic Experience" was chosen as the title of OO IV.1, he suggested that while he understood that not all Vedic texts are mantras, chanting them brings forth their roots, but does so in a new context for each human occasion. Thus, the word mantra together with the word manjari, which means a collection of blossoms (margarita), are combined in the word mantra-manjari to encapsulate the roots as well as the new, beautiful, and refreshing experience of the Vedas.

The methodology used by Panikkar in choosing texts is that the choice be not solely that of an individual, but that texts that are acceptable to others be chosen as well. Regarding authorship, Panikkar makes a very daring and intra-religious choice by asserting the traditional notion of apauruseya or non-authorship, either human or divine, of the Vedas. This notion purifies our relationship with the text so that "any one of us is the author of the Vedas when we read, pray, and understand them." Thus, the "study" of the Vedas undertaken by Panikkar and reproduced in his work was that of "representation." Representation offers the possibility that the music of the Vedas be played again and that in doing so the person "studying" them could become a Hindu and experience the sound and the representation of a Hindu in the synchronic tense of the hermeneutical circle. In doing so, the person offers the possibility of expanding the diachronic possibilities of a common intra-religious dialogue that goes beyond the reasoning of two elements (Christian and Hindu) that do not, and cannot, converge in this present reality but in the beyond of meditation and mysticism. For this reason, Panikkar opens his selection of texts with the invocation to Agni, the mediator, the sacrificial Fire that transforms all human realities into divine realities: OM Agni mile purobitam/yajnasya devam ritvijam/hotaram

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71 Raimon Panikkar, “General Introduction” to Opera Omnia vol. IV.1: Hinduism – Part One: The Vedic Experience: Mantramanjari, pp. xxv-xliv at p. xxv.

72 OO IV.1, p. xxvi.

73 OO IV.1, p. xxvi.

74 OO IV.1, p. xxxi.

75 OO IV.1, p. xxxi.

76 OO IV.1, p. xxxix.
ratnadhatamam (RigVeda I.1.1). It is thus that Panikkar starts his celebration of a universal Hinduism as a Christian in Benares. He also closes his readings at Benares with a mantra of praise for the universal wisdom offered by one tradition to another.

**Conclusions: The Pro-Logos and (Monastic) Interreligious Practice**

In his Gifford Lectures, Panikkar outlined the possibility of a mediation between “Being” in Greek philosophy and Eastern practices through an *advaitic* mediation. Non-duality mirrors the life of the Trinity, in which one Absolute assumes three personhoods and manifestations. By Trinity, Panikkar means “the ultimate triadic structure of reality,” and he uses “unbroken Trinity” to foreshorten “the exposition of the radical relativity of the Divine, the Cosmic, and the Human,” which he calls “the *cosmotheantric trinity.*” Within this integrating philosophy, Panikkar puts forth the possibility of rethinking the person, the Individual Being, within a larger cosmology of Trinitarian proportions “that brings together without confusion the transcendent character of the Deity with its equally immanent aspect.” It is this suggestion, I would argue, that provides the foundations for an ongoing Christian-Hindu dialogue.

Dialogue among the three so-called religions of the Book, namely Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, is based on principles of a common recognition of sacred texts in which certain parts of a history of salvation unite followers of norms inherent within those texts. To enter into dialogue with Hinduism, a way of life and Life itself as a philosophical wisdom of non-duality are central. I cannot change the material aspects of myself, nor can I change the material co-creations (societies) in which I live. However, I can join Hindus on a journey that instead of going somewhere physical goes within, to the Self. The journey into the self (beyond wisdom and action) provides the possibility of relocating the Absolute so that it is in relation to a commonality of religious beings who belong to different religious systems. Thus, the Absolute as pro-logos (or pro-Logos for Christians) provides the necessary communion with Hindus to assert together the centrality of the metaphysical as the essential component of the human and the Divine. Moreover, the monk and the “monkness” in us all provides an archetype of the essential and the truthful. This interreligious movement from the Self and within the Absolute is central not only in Christian monasticism that looks to the East but also among inclusivist Hindus who relate to other religious beings because “Hindu inclusivism can be expressed as the view that the other religions of the world are, more or less, forms of Hinduism.”

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77 OO IV.1, “First Mantra,” p. xlv.


What unites monks of different traditions is the contemplation of a world devoid of materiality in an ongoing Christian, Hindu, and Buddhist meditation that is focused on cause and effect, explanation, and imminence. First, one looks at an object, then one does not see the object but light/darkness; on a further stage one sees nothingness. The challenge of Christian-Hindu dialogue is to dialogue and to journey, knowing that the further we go the less we will need to understand. Thus, Panikkar in his epilogue to the published volume of the Gifford Lectures made the following personal admission:

I have touched the limits of my understanding and must stop here. The Tree of Knowledge again and again tempts one at the cost of neglecting the more important tree, the Tree of Life.\textsuperscript{81}

It is at the end of those limits of understanding that dialogue can truly begin within the language of silence, experience, and mystical contemplation.

\textsuperscript{81}Panikkar, \textit{The Rhythm of Being: The Unbroken Trinity}, “Epilogue,” p. 405.