

Celebrating a Great Scholar

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The well-known Spanish philosopher and theologian, Raimon Panikkar, sometimes described as one of the greatest contemporary scholars in comparative religion and interfaith dialogue, died on 26 August 2010 at the age of 91.

What is his lasting importance and legacy?

So soon after his death it is still perhaps too early for a definite assessment of Panikkar's life and thought. His widely ranging writings are just beginning to be assembled in one place, to be published as collected works in thirty volumes. This monumental task involves the translation of books and articles written in Spanish, Catalan, Italian, French, English and German, not to mention the scriptural sources in Hebrew, Greek, Latin and Sanskrit, so profusely cited in many of his works. The subtlety of his thinking and the sophistication of his language make some of his books difficult to understand, although others, more simply written, speak directly to the heart. Panikkar's extraordinary intellectual and scholarly achievements, breadth of vision and depth of insight make one think of a latter-day Renaissance figure, or of his own Catalan compatriot of the Middle Ages, Ramon Llull, to whom he has sometimes been compared.

Future generations will be able to engage critically and more fully with the inclusiveness and breath-taking dimensions of Panikkar's thought. For now it suffices to recall the power of his radiating presence and the extraordinary richness of a life that contained many diverse, even contradictory aspects, not easily combined, and at times inviting considerable critical comment.

Born in 1918 in Barcelona as the son of a South Indian Hindu father and a Catalan Catholic mother, Raimon Panikkar was educated by Jesuits, then

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studied chemistry and philosophy at the universities of Barcelona, Bonn and Madrid, later followed by theology in Rome. His unusual combination of doctorates in philosophy, chemistry and theology made him an inspiring teacher, open to many different ideas. Around 1940 he met Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer, the founder of Opus Dei, who encouraged him to train for the priesthood. Ordained in 1946, Panikkar continued to be associated with Opus Dei for about twenty years, and broke his ties with their work only in the early 1960s.

He has disclosed little about this time in his life, but his outlook changed profoundly after he decided at the age of 36 to visit India, his father's country, to study Hinduism and Buddhism, an experience that deeply transformed him. After his traditional Catholic and especially neo-Thomist training, he discovered a completely different cultural and religious universe that invited openness, dialogue and a new understanding of Christianity. Most important were his meetings and abiding friendship with three pioneers of Hindu-Christian dialogue, the two Frenchmen, Abbé Jules Monchanin and Dom Henri Le Saux, better known as Swami Abhishiktananda, and the Englishman, Father Bede Griffiths. All four, each in his own way, discovered the deep spiritual wisdom and great richness of Indian thought and mysticism, leading to a new interfaith understanding.

This experience also motivated Panikkar to present a doctoral thesis at Lateran University in Rome, soon published as *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism* (1964), which first brought his work to public attention. It represents a close textual comparison between Thomas Aquinas and Shankara's interpretation of the canonical Hindu scriptures, the *Brahma-Sutras*. Panikkar presents Christ here as a universal symbol transcending the traditional understanding of Christ in Christianity. Following much debate and personal transformation, Panikkar subsequently took a critical, revisionist stance to some of its views when that book was republished almost twenty years later (1981).

Shortly after reading this work in its first edition, I met Panikkar in Delhi at the Indian Philosophical Congress Meeting in 1965; we remained in personal contact and correspondence until his death. I have heard him lecture and debate in India and in England, and visited the temple in Benares (now Varanasi) where he used to stay. For many years he moved between India and the USA, where he taught first at Harvard University (1966–1971), and then at the University of California, Santa Barbara (1971–1987), before returning to live again in Spain, in the small mountain village of Tavertet, north of Barcelona, though travelling extensively until his very last years.

In 1994, in partial fulfilment of a promise made to his father, he undertook the arduous pilgrimage to Mount Kailash, the sacred Himalayan mountain in Tibet, a hazardous undertaking for someone of his age and with a weak heart, but he returned radiant from this spiritual venture. I still cherish the beautiful view of Mount Kailash sent to me in memory of his trip.

Panikkar was a great catholic thinker in two senses of the word: he fostered an inclusive catholic attitude in bringing together many different intel-

lectual and religious worlds, always open to new discoveries and new ways of thinking. But he also remained a faithful Catholic, a member of the Roman Catholic Church, albeit a highly unconventional one who, late in life, decided to get married even though a priest.

His intellectual and spiritual brilliance was a personal gift, but also a tremendous achievement, a synthesis born out of Indian and Spanish influences, an unusual education in different countries, research in several disciplines, many years of teaching, travels and rich experiences in Europe, India and America, and a life of deep meditation, prayer and Eucharistic celebration. He was blessed with the ‘fullness of life’—an idea so dear and central to him that his ninetieth birthday was celebrated in Venice by an international symposium of scholars and friends debating ‘Mysticism: Fullness of Life’. Panikkar has followers and admirers all over the world, among people of different faiths and none. Even the Pope appears to have sought his advice on how best to handle the aftermath of his ill-advised remarks about the Prophet Mohammed in his Regensburg Address of 2006.

Panikkar’s well-known books include *The Silence of God* (1989 [1970]), *Worship and Secular Man* (1973), *The Trinity and the Religious Experience of Man* (1973), the vast translation and commentary on the Vedas and Upanishads published as *The Vedic Experience* (1977), *The Intrareligious Dialogue* (1978), *The Cosmotheandric Experience* (1993), *A Dwelling Place for Wisdom* (1993) and *Christophany: The Fullness of Man* (2004).

Panikkar’s ‘cosmotheandric’—the interweaving of the cosmic, divine and human—is sometimes compared to Teilhard de Chardin’s spiritual synthesis born out of the dialogue between the Christian faith and evolution, whereas Panikkar’s is rooted in wisdom theology. The striking similarity of the basic orientation of these two thinkers has been noted by several commentators on Panikkar’s work.

The novelty of his cosmotheandric vision goes far beyond the traditional understanding of *cosmos—theos—anthropos*, however. Interweaving these three implies that a significant mutation has occurred in spirituality which has revealed ‘the holiness of the secular’. He often speaks of ‘sacred secularity’, acknowledging that he stands at the confluence of the Hindu, Christian, Buddhist and secular traditions. This is a new position that combines vulnerable openness with creative religious possibilities, challenging traditional religious and especially conservative Christian perspectives. Panikkar’s theology of religions moved from an earlier position of inclusivism to one of radical pluralism that encourages an openness much appreciated among people of different faiths and Christian denominations.

The fullness of cosmic, human and divine realities unfolds in Panikkar’s universal ‘Christophany’ that transcends divisions of cultures and faiths. According to his own account, he aimed to overcome a ‘tribal Christology’, especially that of the colonial past, when Christianity attempted to convert Christ into an imperial God triumphing over other Gods, ‘by a Christophany

which allows Christians to see the work of Christ everywhere, without assuming that they have a better grasp or a monopoly of that Mystery, which has been revealed to them in a unique way'. Thus, far from diluting core Christian beliefs, dialogue fosters interreligious understanding and harmony, and provides an indispensable medium for deepening the Christian faith.

In June 2010, Panikkar's long-awaited Gifford Lectures, *The Rhythm of Being*, were published, more than twenty years after their delivery and after many redraftings. Their publication two months before his death provides an abiding signature to his life's work. It was also at the end of June that Panikkar wrote to his friends that the moment had come 'To withdraw from all public activity, both the direct and intellectual participation... I will continue to be close to you in a deeper way, through silence and prayer, and in the same way I would ask you to be close to me in this last period of my existence.' It was to be his final communication.

Panikkar's works cover such wide-ranging perspectives that no single author could possibly do justice to them. Who could capture all the facets of the daring vision of this foremost intercultural and interreligious thinker who wrote in several European languages for over fifty years? His works belong to the larger context of a dialogue of cultures and civilizations and the ongoing debates about the challenges of pluralism and the search for a Catholic theology of religions.

For those who knew him, there is much more to be remembered and celebrated than Panikkar's vast scholarship and signal contributions to several areas of theology, philosophy, spirituality and mysticism. Joseph Prabhu has aptly expressed what many feel when he stated that Panikkar 'managed to combine the quiet dignity of a sage, the profundity of a scholar, the depth of a contemplative, and the warmth and charm of a friend in his sparkling personality'. His extraordinary presence, brilliant intellect and abundant love of life will remain an inspiration for many; the catholicity of his work ranging from the dialogical, theological and pastoral to the poetic, spiritual and mystical leaves a rich legacy for the world, and especially for scholars of Indian thought.

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NOTE: Among the many studies on Panikkar, the following are especially helpful for their richness of sources and perspectives pertaining to Panikkar's work:

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