

## Radicalizing the Trinity: a Christian Theological Reflection on Panikkar's Radical Trinity

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### Abstract

In his earliest writings Raimon Panikkar (1918-2010) develops a trinitarian vision of the universe which he later applies to his encounters with world religions and cultures. He calls this the “cosmotheandric” (cosmic-divine-human) insight. In his Gifford Lectures entitled “The Trinity and Atheism: The Dwelling of the Divine in the Contemporary World” (1989), later published as *The Rhythm of Being* (2010), Panikkar speaks of the “radical Trinity” as the mature understanding of the Christian insight and of most human traditions. He specifically defends his thesis according to classical Christian teaching. Here we explore the cogency of Panikkar's position including his understanding of the Trinity as a fundamental challenge to monotheism.

### Panikkar's Trinitarian Vision

In his earliest writings in philosophy, theology and science (1940s and 1950s),<sup>1</sup> Panikkar develops a trinitarian vision of the universe as a way of challenging the western metaphysical mindset which, in his view, privileges the unity of reality and divine transcendence to the detriment of multiplicity and divine immanence. Already in these formative years, he becomes suspicious of the over-identification of *Being* and *God*—and the over-separation of the immanent and economic Trinity. He is already speaking of

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<sup>1</sup> See especially the following early works of Raimon (Raimundo) Panikkar: “Síntesis. Visión de síntesis del universo,” *Arbor* (Madrid), no. 1 (1944): 5-40; *El concepto de naturaleza* (Ph.D. diss., University of Madrid, 1946; Madrid: CSIC, 1951); *F. H. Jacobi y la filosofía del sentimiento* (Buenos Aires: Sapientia, 1948); *Ontonomía de la ciencia* (Ph.D. diss., University of Madrid, 1958; Madrid: Gredos, 1961). *Humanismo y cruz* [anthology of Panikkar's theological writings 1944-1955], (Madrid: Rialp, 1963).

the interrelationship of and harmony among the three poles of reality—God, humanity and cosmos—so that to speak of one without relationship to the other dimensions is to distort reality itself. So, for the early Panikkar, the Trinity is true symbol of all and every reality. It follows that one cannot understand nature, the world or human existence without reference to the divine dimension. Everything is threefold including the cosmos (matter, space, time), humanity (intelligence, will, sentiment) and God (Father, Son, Spirit).

Little wonder, then, that Panikkar's trinitarian consciousness is brought into play in his meeting with religious traditions beyond western, Christian shores. In *The Trinity and the Religious Experience of Man*,<sup>2</sup> described as "one of the best and least read meditations on the Trinity in (the twentieth) century,"<sup>3</sup> Panikkar develops an understanding of three diverse forms of spirituality in the world's religions: the silent, apophatic spirituality represented in the Buddhist experience of *nirvana*; the personalist spirituality of the Word represented in the Abrahamic traditions; and the immanent spirituality of the Spirit represented in cosmic traditions, most notably in the Hindu *advaitic* experience of the non-duality of self and the Absolute. Evidently, these three spiritualities can be related to the Trinitarian God of Christian faith, Father, Son and Spirit. However, Panikkar is equally intent on demonstrating how these three spiritualities can be harmonized in light of the Trinity. He also wants to show that Christians have no monopoly on a trinitarian understanding and that encounter with other spiritualities is the catalyst for deepening our faith in the trinitarian mystery.

By the 1980s, Panikkar extends his trinitarian vision to embrace other traditions and cultures, including those which do not define themselves in religious or theistic terms. Initially, he calls this the "cosmotheandric principle"<sup>4</sup>—the one but intrinsically threefold interrelationship of cosmic matter, human consciousness and divine freedom. In his 1989 Gifford

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<sup>2</sup> Raimon Panikkar, *The Trinity and the Religious Experience of Man* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1973).

<sup>3</sup> Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2000), 167.

<sup>4</sup> For Panikkar's earliest usage of this term, see his "Colligite Fragmenta: For an Integration of Reality," *From Alienation to Atonement*, ed. F. A. Eigo (Villanova University Press, 1977), 19-91. See also this and other essays in Raimon Panikkar, *The Cosmotheandric Experience: Emerging Religious Consciousness*, ed. Scott Eastham (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993).

Lectures, later refined in his *The Rhythm of Being*,<sup>5</sup> he speaks of this as the “radical Trinity,” emphasizing the dynamic interplay of matter, mind and spirit. In so doing, Panikkar declares his ambition of presenting the cosmotheandric intuition as “an adequate cross-cultural universal for the majority of cultures of our time”.<sup>6</sup> His argument moves in two directions. On the one hand, he wants to uncover this “almost universal trinitarian insight of humanity”<sup>7</sup> to demonstrate what he terms the “theanthropocosmic invariant” as belonging to human consciousness.<sup>8</sup> On the other, he aims to show that the Christian Trinity is an inspired disclosure of this triadic pattern. He specifically defends this thesis in terms of traditional Christian doctrine. This paper focuses on this second aspect: is Panikkar’s radical Trinity a legitimate expression—even “an enlarging and deepening”<sup>9</sup>—of classical Christian theology?

### Panikkar’s Methodology

Panikkar’s work in general, and *The Rhythm of Being* in particular, do not follow the traditional path of Christian theological writings—even though he explicitly states he is presenting a theology.<sup>10</sup> Commenting on this, with particular attention to the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, Panikkar states:

There are thousands of articles and books trying to make sense of that dogma for our times. They study Christian Scripture and the Greek and Latin Fathers, interpret and correct them, follow the scholastics or depart from them, are inspired by modern thinkers, use process theology, secular methods, or a liberation paradigm, and so on. Such works, of orthodox,

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<sup>5</sup> Raimon Panikkar, *The Rhythm of Being: The Gifford Lectures* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2010). [The original Gifford Lectures in Edinburgh 1989 were entitled “The Trinity and Atheism: The Dwelling of the Divine in the Contemporary World”].

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 268. Accepting there are no “cultural universals,” Panikkar argues there are nonetheless “limited cross-cultural universals” such as the “cosmotheandric intuition.”

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 212.

<sup>8</sup> “Theanthropocosmic” similarly refers to the divine (*theos*), human (*anthropos*) and cosmic (*cosmos*) dimensions of reality. The “theanthropocosmic invariant” refers specifically to human consciousness of this threefold reality: “Man as Man is aware of the three realms.” *Ibid.*, 269.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 258.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, xxxii.

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catholic, and/or protestant inspiration, perform an invaluable service for the Christian community, and again make credible and effective that central dogma of Christianity. The import of these Gifford Lectures, however, is different.<sup>11</sup>

Panikkar's 'difference' in relation to traditional Christian theology can be explained in the following terms. He is writing from the perspective of his own experience of the Divine Mystery interpreted with one eye on traditional Christian hermeneutics and the other on the hermeneutics of interreligious dialogue. This does not mean he is half Christian and half something else (for example Hindu), just as we would not say a German Christian or Indonesian Hindu is half German/Indonesian and half Christian/Hindu. What this also reminds us is that every religious expression—Christian, Hindu, Buddhist or other—is and can only be experienced and expressed in specific cultural forms.

It is the depth of his engagement with the religious and cultural pluralism of our age that provides Panikkar with his particular approach. He surmises that we live in a time of unprecedented challenge amounting to a 'mutation' in the human experience of reality—and perhaps in reality itself.<sup>12</sup> In order to arrive at a constructive response, we need first to understand and then diagnose the contemporary situation. Relying on the abundance of knowledge and technology at our disposal cannot even begin to address the deeper spiritual crisis confronting humankind. If there is a place which may assist us in our search for wisdom, let us begin with those spiritual and cultural traditions which witness to a 'third dimension' of human experience largely ignored, repressed and certainly privatized in the pan-economic, technocratic global culture enveloping today's world.<sup>13</sup> This is the experience of the Divine Mystery under various guises, names and forms that has been integral to all peoples and cultures—at least until the arrival of the post-Enlightenment world.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 256.

<sup>12</sup> In speaking of the current mutation in the human experience of the world, Panikkar asks: "Could it be that reality itself is shifting profoundly, and that we are changing with it?" Ibid., xxvi.

<sup>13</sup> Panikkar often speaks in *Rhythm* of the "third eye" which represents the mystical apprehension of reality. Ibid., 91f., 241ff, et al.

<sup>14</sup> "We may recall that with the main exception of the so-called Enlightenment, most traditional cultures have considered the universe in general and the earth in particular as a temple of the Divine. . . . Modern culture has constructed a civilization in which the Divine is ousted from the actual life of the *civitas*." Ibid., 234.

Now, if this sounds like a return to a more primitive world and worldview, Panikkar is equally challenging of anachronistic solutions from a number of perspectives. First, existentially, we are incapable of returning to such a world, even if we wished. Second, modern secular consciousness has its own spiritual insights into the ultimate ('sacred') significance of freedom, authenticity, justice and the earth itself which challenge and even purify certain aspects of religious consciousness.<sup>15</sup> Third, in the shift from historical to post-historical (or trans-historical) consciousness, the *de facto* plurality of religious and cultural forms needs to embrace a new openness to this pluralistic challenge of our times.

Before turning to Panikkar's hermeneutics of the radical Trinity, and the question of its compatibility with the Trinity of Christian revelation, we need to identify one further important aspect of his methodology. This is the aspect which most challenges readers trained in the western academies. It has to do with Panikkar's penchant for marrying poetic insight (the realm of symbol) with philosophical reflection (the realm of concept). In regard to this he states:

My *locus philosophicus*... will not be solely in the domain of concepts that form the common currency of our times, but in the realm of symbols that may more appropriately describe the situation of humanity over its entire historical period.<sup>16</sup>

Moving from concept to symbol, Panikkar then introduces a third level discourse he calls myth: "I would like to fathom the underlying myth, as it were, and be able to provide elements of what may be the emerging myth for human life in its post-historical venture."<sup>17</sup> Myth underscores the prominence Panikkar gives to experience over interpretation. The importance of the *logos* is not denied. However, it is the symbol which as an 'ontomythical reality' overcomes the dualistic separation of *mythos* and *logos*, subject and object. He has long defined his hermeneutical task in terms of "restoring symbols to life and eventually of letting new symbols emerge."<sup>18</sup> The emphasis on myth and symbol underscores the pre-reflective experience of the interdependence and interrelationship of all reality. For Panikkar, its most telling symbol is the Trinity.

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<sup>15</sup> Panikkar names this "sacred secularity". See his *Worship and Secular Man* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1977) where he initially develops this notion.

<sup>16</sup> *Rhythm*, xxvi.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, xxvi.

<sup>18</sup> Panikkar, *Myth, Faith and Hermeneutics* (New York: Paulist, 1979), 8.

## The Radical Trinity

Panikkar introduces his notion of the radical Trinity with the following provocative statement:

The radical Trinity I am advocating will not blur the distinction between Creator and creature—to use those names—but would as it were extend the privilege of the divine Trinity to the whole of reality. Reality is not only “trinitarian”; it is the true and ultimate Trinity. The Trinity is not the privilege of the Godhead but the character of reality as a whole.<sup>19</sup>

Panikkar’s radical Trinity expressed in cosmotheandric terms arises from his experience and understanding of the trinitarian character of all reality: divine presence, human consciousness, cosmic matter. Thus, the Trinity is not a monopoly of Christianity, nor even of the divinity. It is reality itself that is trinitarian—or, in the language of Vedanta, *advaitic*.<sup>20</sup> Admitting he does not intend to mix up Christian Trinity and the Vedantic *advaita* as theological belief systems—since “each belongs to a distinct universe”<sup>21</sup>—I would say that Panikkar reads the one through the other; and reads both in terms of the Buddhist insight into the ‘radical relativity’ of all (*pratityasamutpada*). For example, *advaita* may be read in monistic terms—God and the world are ‘not two’ since ‘all is Brahman’ and the world of multiplicity mere ‘illusion’.<sup>22</sup> Panikkar’s non-dual or a-dual reading of *advaita* as ‘neither one nor two’ overturns both monism and dualism: there is differentiation and interrelation between God and the world as within the divinity itself reflected in the mutual relations of Father, Son and Spirit.

However, Christian trinitarian belief also benefits through interreligious communication with the Vedantic *advaita* which emphasizes spiritual experience over rational thought. Panikkar even states that “we need mystical experience in order to break into the consciousness that is to be grasped by the *advaitic* nature of reality.”<sup>23</sup> In other language, *advaitic* knowledge belongs to the ‘third eye’ which is in the field of spiritual experience. While Christian theology acknowledges the trinitarian mystery at the heart of God, he complains with other theologians that it seems to

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<sup>19</sup> *Rhythm*, 260.

<sup>20</sup> “Trinity amounts to *advaita*.” *Ibid.*, 234.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Panikkar acknowledges that the monistic interpretation of *advaita* is not uncommon. *Ibid.*, 222.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 221.

have had minimal importance for Christian life.<sup>24</sup> This is partly explained in terms of the dominance of western thought which gives such prominence to the *logos* and rational thought. Along with this, we also note the relative neglect of a theology of the Spirit and the spirituality of divine immanence. Consequently, Christian theology tends to isolate the Trinity in the Godhead without much attention to the manner in which the trinitarian mystery is present in human life and throughout creation. The *advaitic* insight challenges this dualistic separation of God and the world as it invites Christians to depth their own trinitarian tradition.

### The Christian Trinity?

Even if Panikkar seeks to be doing little more than “establishing a link” between his radical Trinity and the Christian tradition, we need to enquire as to its claimed validity in Christian terms. Here I need to acknowledge my dependence on Ewert Cousins (d. 2009) who defends what he calls Panikkar’s *advaitic trinitarianism* as a fully orthodox expression of Christian faith.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, he accredits Panikkar with developing the universalizing currents in the history of trinitarian theology that links the Trinity to the entire expanse of the universe in creation and history. Nonetheless, Cousins concentrates on Panikkar’s earlier works<sup>26</sup> and did not have access to *The Rhythm of Being*. Consequently, we will adapt Cousin’s analysis to the more radical Trinity of *The Rhythm of Being* including its specific critique of monotheism.

Panikkar develops his dynamic understanding of the Trinity according to his reading of the Pauline trinitarian formula: “God is *above* all, *through* all and *in* all” (Eph. 4:6). Whereas the west has tended to follow Augustine’s psychological model of the Trinity (Father/Being; Son/Intellect; Spirit/Love), the eastern patristic formulation (Father/Source or the *I*; Son/Being or the *Thou*; Spirit/Return to Being or Ocean of Being, the *we*), is closer to Panikkar’s radical Trinity.<sup>27</sup> The Greek fathers in particular saw

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 213.

<sup>25</sup> Ewert Cousins: “The Trinity and World Religions,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 7/3 (1970): 476-498; and “Panikkar’s Advaitic Trinitarianism,” *The Intercultural Challenge of Raimon Panikkar*, ed. Joseph Prabhu (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996), 119-130.

<sup>26</sup> Especially Panikkar’s: *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism* 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1964); and *The Trinity and the Religious Experience of Man* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1973).

<sup>27</sup> In *The Trinity and Religious Experience* Panikkar refers to Augustine’s formulation “we

creation as a trinitarian act (*from* the Father, *through* the Son and *in* the Spirit) and so emphasized the actions of the persons of the Trinity not only in redemption and sanctification but also throughout all history and creation.<sup>28</sup> This opens the way to viewing the trinitarian action beyond the confines of a particular religious tradition to embrace other cultures, traditions and the cosmos itself.

Especially in *The Rhythm of Being*, Panikkar relies on the eastern patristic notion of *creatio continua* to emphasize that creation is not a single act in the past but an ongoing single-but-differentiated reality in time past, present and future. Evidently, some theologians see this as being in conflict with the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* (since God is 'eternal'/outside time). Panikkar resolves this tension with reference to the 'tempiternal' character of Being which reads eternity and time, like Creator and creation, in non-dualistic terms: "The structure of the whole is tempiternal from moment to moment, the continuous creation of the rhythm of the dance of Nataraja, which is an Indic symbol for creation as divine play. Here again, time and eternity are neither two nor one."<sup>29</sup> Panikkar sees resonances here with the Greek Patristic notion of *perichoresis*,<sup>30</sup> the divine dance/indwelling of Father, Son and Spirit, now reflected through *creatio continua* in all dimensions of reality, cosmic, human and divine.

Panikkar's cosmotheandric reading of the Trinity also has links with the vestige doctrine of medieval Augustinianism. In comparison to the Greeks, the western vestige doctrine recognizes reflections or traces of the Trinity in less mystical and more concrete ways. Since the Trinity is intimate to the very structure of creation, its presence can be detected in the physical universe, the human soul, human community and, indeed, in every particle of matter. Even a speck of dust, according to the medievalist Grosseteste, reflects: the power of the Father who created it; the presence of the Son through its intelligible shape and form; and the image of the Spirit

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are, we know, we will (or love)" as 'inspired' and 'valid' but, for all that, "its anthropocentricity is obvious." 68f.

<sup>28</sup> The "profoundly dynamic concept" of the Trinity is noted in the Greek Patristics (Gregory Nazianzan, Basil, Pseudo-Dionysius, John Damascene) and Bonaventure. See Cousins, "The Trinity," esp. 495ff.

<sup>29</sup> *Rhythm*, 226. "Tempiternity" is another Panikkar neologism meaning the non-dual relationship of 'time' and 'eternity.'

<sup>30</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius and John Damascene (8<sup>th</sup> century) are two classical authors who use the term *perichoresis* to highlight the dynamic and vital character of each divine person, as well as the coherence and immanence of each divine person in the other two.



in its useful purpose. As a Franciscan, Bonaventure (13<sup>th</sup> century) develops a more cosmic sense in which he sees the entire universe as a vast mirror manifesting the power, wisdom and goodness of the triune God.<sup>31</sup> Bonaventure also develops Augustine's trinitarian model: the human person/soul/psyche (identified as memory/mind, intelligence/word; will/love) is an 'image' or 'mirror' of the Trinity in the depths of one's personal interiority.

Another expression of the vestige approach can be traced to Richard of St Victor (12<sup>th</sup> century) who saw the Trinity reflected in human interpersonal community viewed through the prism of human love: the lover, the beloved, their mutual love. Rather than focusing on the individual human person, this social model of Trinity, which has become popular among contemporary theologians,<sup>32</sup> sees the interpersonal communion of mind, heart and spirit as a more suitable trinitarian symbol. Panikkar himself *somewhat* reflects this model with reference to the dynamic, interpersonal structure of language: 'Father/I—Son/Thou—Spirit/we.'<sup>33</sup> In this context, it is worth noting that if either trinitarian model is taken over-literally—perhaps, in Panikkar's terms, as concepts rather than symbols—the social model may border on tri-theism, and the psychological model tend towards modalism. On the other hand, we would be foolish to abandon any model or formulation on the basis that it may fall into heterodoxy if pushed to an extreme. In any case, the vestige approach to the Trinity is well established in the Christian tradition in a manner that is fully in accord with Panikkar's conviction that the trinitarian mystery is reflected in all and every reality.

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<sup>31</sup> For Bonaventure, "the creation of the world is like a book in which the creative Trinity shines forth, is represented and is read according to three levels of expression: by way of vestige, image and likeness." Cousins, "The Trinity," 485f.

<sup>32</sup> See, for example: Leonardo Boff, *Holy Trinity, Perfect Community* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000); Anthony Kelly, *The Trinity of Love* (Wilmington, Del.: Michael Glazier, 1989); Catherine La Cugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), Jurgen Moltmann, *History and the Triune God* (London: SCM, 1991); John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary, 1985).

<sup>33</sup> *Rhythm*, 190ff. In earlier writings, Panikkar refers to this as "The Threefold Linguistic Intra-subjectivity". In suggesting that Panikkar *somewhat* reflects this model, I note his emphasis is not so much on the 'I-thou-we' as on the 'I-thou-It/Is' structure of language: "Without the Divine we cannot say 'I', without the Human or consciousness, we cannot say 'Thou', and without the World or cosmos, we cannot say 'It'." Ibid., 191.

Apart from the vestige doctrine of the medievalists, another trinitarian approach is the appropriation doctrine developed by the scholastics but with roots in the western fathers. Here we understand that even though each divine person possesses all divine attributes, we can rightly attribute or ‘appropriate’ distinct attributes to each divine person in light of the processions. Thus, power is attributed to the Father who is source, wisdom to the Son as Word or image of the Father, and goodness with the Spirit who is the fullness and completion of the Trinity.<sup>34</sup> One advantage of this approach, when linked to the vestige doctrine, is that it opens the way for the revelation and experience of the Trinity of appropriations outside the world of Christian experience and discourse. As we have noted above, Panikkar connects to this approach in his earlier works, such as *The Trinity and the Religious Experience of Man*, where he discerns particular appropriations of the Trinity across the panorama of world religions.

In *The Rhythm of Being*, Panikkar does not speak of appropriations, but of “the triadic myth” which he discerns in cultures and traditions, east and west, from Egypt to China, Greece to Rome, India to Arabia.<sup>35</sup> This leads to his affirmation that “a certain trinitarian pattern seems to have occurred spontaneously to human consciousness since the beginnings of historical memory.”<sup>36</sup> Such ‘appropriations’ are not limited to religious traditions; they may well be discerned in other cultures—in much the same way as Bonaventure allowed for Greek philosophers coming to know God through triune appropriations (as distinct from the triune persons of revelation). No doubt extending Bonaventure, but still in the spirit of the appropriation doctrine, Panikkar refers to the myriads of triads—divine, metaphysical, anthropological, psychological, kosmological, chronological, ethical, liturgical, legendary—as suggestive of the trinitarian mystery.<sup>37</sup> His conclusion is that neither religious consciousness nor the Christian Trinity is tied to theisms. In this way, too, modern secular culture may well highlight

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<sup>34</sup> Cousins notes that in the 13<sup>th</sup> century the following ‘appropriations’ were widely accepted in respective reference to Father, Son and Spirit: power, wisdom, goodness; unity, truth, goodness; unity, equality, harmony; eternity, beauty, fruition; omnipotence, omniscience, will; efficient, exemplary and final cause (not unlike *sat, cit, ananda*—being, consciousness bliss—in reference to Brahman in Hindu thought. “The Trinity,” 490f. See also Kelly, *The Trinity of Love*, 244.

<sup>35</sup> *Rhythm.*, 227-232. An example from the mystical tradition of Islam: “My beloved is Three—Three yet only one; Many things appear as three, Which are no more than one” (Ibn’Arabi). *Ibid.*, 230.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 232.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 231f.

particular ‘appropriations’ of the trinitarian mystery without explicating these in Christian theistic language. Evidently, this raises the question of the place and importance of theism—in particular, monotheism—for authentic, orthodox Christian faith.

### Beyond Monotheism?

If we want to acclaim an essential affinity between Christian trinitarian belief and Panikkar’s radical Trinity, we need to face the question of his sustained critique of monotheism throughout *The Rhythm of Being*.<sup>38</sup> It is true that Panikkar sometimes makes some startling claims, such as: “The Incarnation is incompatible with monotheism. What the Incarnation does is to upset the monotheistic idea of Divinity.”<sup>39</sup> We need first to understand that Panikkar attaches great importance to the manner in which Christian trinitarian doctrine emerged within a particular historical setting marked by clear monotheistic roots in Judaism, strong focus on the *Logos/logos* in Judaism and Greek philosophy and, finally, the imperial monotheistic policy following Constantine. In such a setting, suggests Panikkar, it is remarkable that Christian thinkers developed such a sophisticated trinitarian doctrine, as it is also understandable that they and subsequent theologies downplayed its importance.

Second, Panikkar’s critique of monotheism is both radical and nuanced. He is not even fully satisfied with the movement from “strict and rigid monotheism” (God as Supreme Being) to what he calls “qualified monotheism” (God as Being) because, in his reckoning, this still entraps God and the Divine Mystery into the strictures of being and consciousness.<sup>40</sup> His understanding of the Trinity, he says, is “simple”:

Ultimate reality is neither One (Being, nor anything real) with three modes, nor Three (substances, beings) within a single abstract oneness—*neti, neti*. The Trinity is pure relationship, and here lies the great challenge and the

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<sup>38</sup> See especially, *Rhythm* 120-155; Other recent attempts to construct a “Theology Beyond Monotheism” include: Laurel C. Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism: A Theology of Multiplicity* (London: Routledge, 2008); and Richard Kearney, *Anatheism: Returning to God after God* (New York: Columbia University, 2011).

<sup>39</sup> *Rhythm*., 257.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 149-156. Panikkar is prepared to admit that “qualified monotheism may be one of the least imperfect historical ways to confront ourselves with that real Mystery one of whose names is God.” *Ibid.*, 156.

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profound transformation. If the Divine were a substance we would have three Gods; if the Divine is infinite relationship, this relationship also enters all creatures and Man in a special way.<sup>41</sup>

The problem with the God/(Supreme) Being identification, in Panikkar's reading, is that the dualistic separation of Creator-creature, God-world, transcendence-immanence reduce the trinitarian mystery to the "inner life" of God—as many contemporary theologians admit. Those same theologians are attempting to recover the original trinitarian insight into the non-dual relationship between the economic Trinity (*ad extra*) and immanent Trinity (*ad intra*).<sup>42</sup> However, for Panikkar, these theologies do not go far enough on account of their fear of over-identifying God and the world (pantheism). In order to avoid this, he appeals to the doctrine of creation as revealing something more than an oblique trinitarian presence of God in creation.<sup>43</sup>

By stressing the trinitarian nature of all reality, Panikkar provides a new space for reclaiming a trinitarian doctrine of creation. Part of this involves his desire to "degrade both the One and the many as ontological categories."<sup>44</sup> In other language, God, humanity and world are not three separable substances, beings or things—in fact, they are not substances, beings or things at all. No *one* reality exists outside of the dynamic interrelationship (or *perichoresis*) of all three. Nonetheless, relying on the early Patristic formulation of the Trinity, I suggest Panikkar does admit to—or at least allow for—a certain monotheistic understanding provided it stresses the inter- and intra-relatedness of all and every reality including the Divine. He refers to this as "the non-dual-One or One-non-duality" that includes all beings without suffocating them in the "embrace of the One":

The Trinity qualifies this Oneness, telling us that this nondual Oneness embraces the whole of Reality and is completed in itself. It returns

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 225.

<sup>42</sup> "The immanent Trinity reveals something about the Trinity *ad extra*, which is the World, but the Trinity *ad extra* also reveals something about the Trinity *ad intra*, which is the Divine." *Rhythm*, 226. While recognizing this insight is often accredited to Karl Rahner, Panikkar notes that it is also present in the Trinitarian theology of Thomas Aquinas. Ibid., 259.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 260. Modern theological critique of western Christianity's neglect of its doctrine of Creation is common-place. For a recent example, see Denis Edwards, *How God Acts: Creation, Redemption, and Special Divine Action* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010).

<sup>44</sup> *Rhythm*, 227.

to the Source, gathering in its return all the scattered temporal fragments originating in the primal outburst of the Source.<sup>45</sup>

To my way of thinking, it is this mitigated, non-dual monotheistic strain which provides continuity with classical Christian teaching of unity of/in God; at the same time, it represents a step beyond the normal western conception of what is implied by the term ‘monotheism’—which, as Panikkar admits, all too easily slips into deism and/or atheism. To use another quotation from *The Rhythm of Being* which appears to support this contention, Panikkar states that “Christian orthodoxy consists in avoiding tritheism, on one hand, and *strict* monotheism, on the other.”<sup>46</sup>

The classical term which Panikkar most employs in his reflection on the Divine Mystery is *perichoresis*—or its Latin equivalent *circumincessio* (or the more passive *circuminsessio*).<sup>47</sup> The Cappadocian Fathers use *perichoresis*—being-in-one-another, permeation without confusion—as a trinitarian metaphor to emphasize that the three divine persons are neither blurred nor separated—nor, for that matter, hierarchically constituted. They express both what they are in themselves and at the same time what God is: ecstatic, relational, dynamic, vital. The image of the divine dance highlights an eternal movement of co-equal partners involved in reciprocal giving and receiving. Catherine La Cugna notes how *perichoresis* identifies divine unity neither in the divine substance (Latin) nor exclusively in the person of the Father (Greek) but “locates unity instead in diversity, in a true *communion* of persons.”<sup>48</sup> The metaphor certainly challenges a notion of divinity that thinks of God as Absolute Subject,<sup>49</sup> let alone some kind of solitary or supreme Being—and, in this sense, certainly opposes many monotheistic conceptions, as Panikkar notes. However, it is another step again to suggest that *perichoresis* as developed in the tradition is opposed to a trinitarian monotheism—which affirms both unity and plurality in the Divine Mystery named God.

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 226f.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 224. [Emphasis mine].

<sup>47</sup> See La Cugna, *God For Us*, 272.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 271.

<sup>49</sup> The notion of God as Absolute Subject who distributes him/itself in three modes is clearly suggestive of the theology of Karl Barth and, somewhat similarly, Karl Rahner. See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 1, part 1, “The Triune God” (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975), 295-304; and Karl Rahner, *The Trinity* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1970).

From the Christian perspective, Panikkar's cosmotheandric insight can be read in terms of the radicalization of the *perichoresis* metaphor. While classical Christian teaching reads *perichoresis* as affirming unity, plurality, harmony, communion, mutuality and interdependence in the immanent Trinity, its implications for the economic Trinity (especially in Latin theology) are less well developed. Recent theological moves to bring the immanent and economic Trinities closer together are helpful, but they still tend to downplay the manner in which "the trinitarian structure of Divinity percolates, as it were, throughout all (His) creation."<sup>50</sup> So we are told, for example, that the human community is "supposed to imitate this *perichoresis* in its own configuration."<sup>51</sup> Political, liberation and feminist theologians make productive use of this approach.<sup>52</sup> However, one notes here a certain extrinsicism: we might say that God is perichoretic, so we (the human community) should imitate this. By way of contrast, Panikkar takes the more radical step of reading *perichoresis* as applicable to all reality, divine, human and cosmic. There is no question of mere imitation: all reality participates in the divine dance. Reality itself—including the cosmos as well as humanity—is perichoretic. While such an approach may be understood in non-theistic terms, it does not in itself require the abandonment of theism including, in my view, a *trinitarian* monotheism.

## Conclusion

This order of language is, of course, perpetually slippery. My attempt here is simply to argue that Panikkar's radical Trinity may be interpreted in accordance with classical Christian teaching. I would even like to suggest that his trinitarian hermeneutics has the capacity to enlarge and deepen the mystical dimension of Christian theology. It achieves this through the reclaiming and reformulation of classical metaphors and doctrines such as *creatio continua* and *perichoresis* as well as the vestige and appropriation doctrines. However, the question remains: does this require the overturning of the monotheistic paradigm? Perhaps the answer to this is *neti, neti*. As we have seen, Panikkar certainly challenges those monotheistic conceptions of the Divine as some kind of entity 'out there' separable from other reality.

<sup>50</sup> *Rhythm*, 227.

<sup>51</sup> *God For Us*, 276.

<sup>52</sup> For example: Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981); Leonardo Boff, *Trinity and Society* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988); Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is* (New York: Crossroad, 1992); Sally McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987).

Indeed, the Christian mystery of the Incarnation suggests otherwise. Yet, while opposing all monistic interpretations, Panikkar also affirms the non-dual Oneness of the Divine Mystery in its interrelationship with all reality.

This is surely the point of Panikkar's radical Trinity: not the denial of monotheism *per se*, but the denial of a particular metaphysics which, in equating God and Being, effectively removes divinity from the natural and human world. Christian philosopher Merleau-Ponty expresses this succinctly: "To posit God as Being (in the metaphysical sense) is to bring about a negation of the world."<sup>53</sup> Panikkar's trinitarian hermeneutics—perceiving God, humanity and cosmos in terms of *creatio continua* and *perichoresis*—is certainly a deconstruction of such a monotheistic paradigm. However, it may also be read as the reconstruction of a *trinitarian* monotheism in which the sacred reality of the world participates in the divine (and trinitarian) mystery we name God. While this challenges "strict monotheistic belief," it also suggests such a challenge may be necessary in light of contemporary concerns. And it provides a path for the creative re-reading of classical Christian texts and the possible "transformation of Christian self-consciousness."<sup>54</sup>

In brief, while Panikkar's radical Trinity does represent a fundamental challenge to monotheism *as traditionally understood*, its reinterpretation of classical Christian teaching in terms of the *advaitic* Trinity allows for what I call a *trinitarian* monotheism. God and the world are neither two (absolute separation) nor one (annihilation of one by the other). Rather, all reality, including the Godhead, is inter-relational, trinitarian. This insight does not preclude harmony nor unity (even if in eschatological terms); neither does it shy away from the ultimacy of plurality and diversity. While Panikkar goes to great lengths to show this is not a uniquely Christian insight (preferring to show how it is almost universal across the world's traditions), he admits he 'received' his awareness of the truth of the Trinity through his experience of Christ.<sup>55</sup> And that truth, expressed in Christian terms, is that God is both one (monotheism) and three (trinitarian). While the radical Trinity extends well beyond theistic expressions, the burden of this paper has been to show its compatibility with classical, orthodox Christian belief. Despite Panikkar's

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<sup>53</sup> Cit. Kearney, *Anatheism*, 93, Commenting, Kearney adds: "To equate God with a timeless, otherworldly Being that is sovereign cause of itself and has no desire for nature or humanity—as Descartes and the rationalists did—is to reject the sanctity of the flesh ... (and is) a betrayal of the original message of the Incarnation." Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> *Rhythm.*, 258.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 256.

understandable hesitations with any form of monotheism, the depth of his trinitarian meditations is both timely and important for the future of Christian faith. In relation to God this is surely best expressed in terms of a trinitarian monotheism.