Why Interfaith Dialogue is Necessary but Dangerous: Raimon Panikkar’s Cosmotheandric Vision as a Case in Point

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Abstract
With postcolonial sensibilities, increasing globalization, and intensifying worldwide religiosity, interfaith dialogue has become more important than ever. However, this imperative for dialogue inherently presents perils that the different approaches to dialogue hope to mitigate. The exclusivist approach seeks to assuage the danger of eroding one’s faith system, while the pluralist position seeks to allay the fear of one’s faith system unjustly dominating another. The inclusive approach, in mediating between the two seeming extremes, attempts to validate the dignity of various truth claims without pandering either to extreme rejection or to pedantic assimilation. Raimon Panikkar’s cosmotheandric pluralism, being a case in point, provokes both admiration, because of its creative synthesis, and alarm, because its consequential outcome could potentially be an unrecognizable mutation of the original worldviews it seeks to represent. The inevitable result of such endeavors is the erosion of classical theological categories.

Keywords
dialogue, exclusivism, pluralism, inclusivism, Raimon Panikkar, cosmotheandric

INTRODUCTION

The author of this article writes from the position of a Roman Catholic Christian and therefore thinks with the Catholic Church (sentire cum ecclesia), with the hope that the same generosity that he accords to others
would be granted him. In emphasizing the increasing importance of interfaith dialogue given the landscape of global society today, this article briefly delineates why such dialogical endeavors may be perceived as a risky enterprise to its stakeholders. The discussion is then brought to a deeper level of intensity as Raimon Panikkar’s particular pluralistic position as a unique model of interfaith dialogue is explained and briefly assessed from a viewpoint that is, hopefully, consistent with the faith of the Roman Catholic Church. Panikkar’s model of dialogue serves as a case in point for my claim that interfaith engagement can be a dangerous enterprise despite its necessity.

THE INTENSIFYING NECESSITY OF INTERFAITH ENGAGEMENT

Acutely aware of the inevitable encounters between the Christian and the religious “other,” Karl Rahner opined that non-Christian religions could no longer be perceived from a distance, for they had now come to make themselves present in the midst of modern humanity and had been integrated into people’s lives.1 Societies used to function in a homogenous fashion in terms of language, race, and religion, even if they were somewhat conscious that there were other religious communities in existence alongside them.2 In fact, interreligious encounters resulting from geographical proximity, military invasion, and other similar causes could be more or less ignored. Even in Asia, the coexistence of populations comprising different forms of traditional life was a given that seldom required these religious traditions to interact mutually with one another.3 Evidently, interfaith relations were a very peripheral issue at most, or at least, a nonissue.

Since activities of imperialism brought about encounters with other cultures and religions, it had become impossible to ignore the presence of religious cultures and traditions different from one’s own. Furthermore,

1 Karl Rahner, “Church, Churches and Religions,” in Theological Investigations X, various translators (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1961-84), 30.
2 Harry Oldmeadow, ed., Crossing Religious Frontiers: Studies in Comparative Religion (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2010), vii; José Maria Vigil, Theology of Religious Pluralism (Zurich and Munster: Lit Verlag, 2008), 27.
3 Oldmeadow, ed., Crossing Religious Frontiers, 3.
one also cannot neglect to mention the shockwaves that were sent to both the religious and the nonreligious circles of the world population with the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, which were largely to be understood as a confrontation between those perpetrators and the Western civilization in the name of Islam.

Among the outcomes of this fateful historical event was the emergence of a very vocal intellectual movement whose key proponents were identified by Alister McGrath as “Anglo-Saxon Protestant males from remarkably similar backgrounds of privilege and power,” called the New Atheism. Its advocates were decidedly insistent that humankind’s erroneous belief in God was the reason for such atrocities as 9/11. In evangelizing its case against belief in God, this tenacious antireligious movement arguably exhibits characteristics of being yet another religious confession that exalts its doctrines birthed from its tightly held humanistic ideologies. The onslaught of the New Atheism is perhaps particularly felt by those Abrahamic religions which once perceived themselves as being proponents of the sole truth, and this does not preclude Christianity.

And then there is the whole arena of globalization that has intensified in the past couple of decades. As technology has enhanced economies, transportation, communications, and even politics, the shared space of humanity has become more accessible to a much bigger proportion of society compared to a century ago. This means that societies are encountering one another in an unprecedented manner, such that those which did not overlap in times past have now “become members of one larger social entity, a single world that includes them as sub-societies.”

One would not be going too far in postulating that if there was one historic phenomenon characteristic of the twentieth century, it would be globalization. That it has impacted the volume of emigrations worldwide, the religions and cultures of partners to whom people choose to bind themselves in marriage, and daily habits of media consumption of the world population, among other effects, makes it an epochal reality. This

4 Alister McGrath, Why God Won’t Go Away: Engaging with the New Atheism (London: SPCK, 2011), 24, 25.
5 Marco Pallis, “On Crossing Religious Frontiers,” in Oldmeadow, ed., Crossing Religious Frontiers, 5.
6 Vigil, Theology of Religious Pluralism, 27.
is perhaps what led to Samuel Huntington’s thesis that the main conflict experienced by humanity today is a cultural one, and that this conflict pertains to the great civilizations. The 9/11 event only serves to validate Huntington’s argument.

And yet, despite the intensity of globalization as a result of modernity, it does not at all mean that religion has been on a trajectory toward perpetual demise. The ostensible corrosive effect of modernity upon religion has been a long-debated subject. If it used to be taken for granted that as societies progress they would increasingly become secular, it has now been empirically proven otherwise.

Secularism has taken on a variety of meanings in both the philosophical and social-scientific dimensions. It has generally been understood as a state of being centered on worldly affairs instead of being religion-centered. Visible expressions of secularism would be typified through a preoccupation with “scientific knowledge and human self-regulation,” through which God is rendered redundant. The foremost train of thought of the secularization theory (which arose in the 1950s and the 1960s) was that the onset of modernity inevitably led to the decline and eventual demise of religion in society and among individuals.

Peter L. Berger, like many sociologists of religion during his time, was once a believer in the disappearance thesis, which suggested that Western modernity was characterized by the onset of “religious interpretations” being discarded from the worldview of individuals. In relation to this thesis, he defined secularization as the “process by which sectors of society and culture are removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols.” In accordance with this line of thought, religion is

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7 Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilisations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

8 It derives from the Latin word saeculum, which means “century,” “world-age,” or “temporality.”

9 This definition is adapted from that of Fred Dallmayr, “Rethinking Secularism (with Raimon Panikkar),” in *The Review of Politics* 61 (Fall 1999): 715.

10 Dallmayr, "Rethinking Secularism": 715.

11 Peter L. Berger, *A Rumor of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1969), 108.

12 Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1969), 107.
destined to dissolve at the onset of the scientific era; it is held to be, simply, “institutionalized ignorance and superstition.” But Berger, some three decades after his sustained discourse on the secularization thesis, acknowledged that the secularization thesis had been proven wrong after all, something made apparent through the intensifying religiosity of the global society. Fred R. von Mehden observes that modernization has not obliterated the importance of the supernatural to adherents to Islam, Christianity, and Buddhism. While Berger acknowledges that the reality of modernization has given impetus to some secularizing effects, he asserts that the effects of counter-secularization outweigh the effects of secularization. For this reason of patterns revealed sociologically with regard to the strengthening of religion on a global scale, with the exception of the European continent, the role and importance of religion cannot be ignored. Furthermore, in the light of the manner in which the size of our common space has shrunk because of mutual accessibility, religious communities need to negotiate a common existence among themselves.

THE DANGER OF INTERFAITH ENGAGEMENT

Marco Pallis asserts that dialogue and cooperation among religions require goodwill, a “kindly feeling” shared between religious adherents and leaders, in order to succeed in every form. Such required kindliness and goodwill, while easily identified as a legitimate expression of Christian character, is perhaps the very reason that interfaith dialogue and cooperation pose a cognitive dilemma to its participators. An implicit fear for many a Christian is that of remaining in the tension of standing between a firm conviction of the uniqueness of one’s religious truth claims and entering into the religious worldview of another in an attitude of

13 Dallmayr, “Rethinking Secularism”: 715.
14 Peter L. Berger, “Secularism in Retreat,” The National Interest (Winter 1996/97): 4; and Peter L. Berger, “The Desecularization of the World: A Global Overview,” in Peter L. Berger, ed., The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 1-18.
15 Fred R. von der Mehden, Religion and Modernization in Southeast Asia (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1986), 179.
16 Pallis, “On Crossing Religious Frontiers,” 9.
“epistemological humility.”\textsuperscript{17} At the same time, the “shrunkeness” of our common space renders this struggle nonnegotiable, for we must somehow take into account those whose beliefs are different from and, indeed, even contradictory to ours, in the schema of our own religious worldview. This conflicting tension between fidelity and hospitality is not one that can be ignored. And yet, the fathers of the church and the councils, and in a particular way the spirit of the Second Vatican Council, would not permit us to retreat into hostility. But such determination does not make the task simpler, for it entails the daunting challenge of ploughing our way through decades and centuries of prejudices, cultures, and language barriers.

In defining the dilemma of emerging with what he calls an “ethical theology” of dialogue with other religions, Michael Barnes succinctly notes the nature of the intricacies inherent in this interaction between the Christian faith and other religions:

\begin{quote}
The history of inter-religious relations, often a record of colonial exploitation and unresolved ethnic and inter-communal rivalries, makes a confused situation even more complex. The dangers of manipulation, by one party or the other, the possibilities for misunderstanding on both sides, are all too real. Emphasize distinctiveness and you encourage a self-satisfied sectarianism; suppress it and you risk a fundamentalist backlash.\textsuperscript{18}
\end{quote}

This tension notwithstanding, dialogue should lead to the deepening of one’s commitment to his own faith rather than an erosion of the same.\textsuperscript{19} Jaco Cilliers insists that individuals and groups entering into interreligious dialogue need first to seek a deep understanding of their own religious traditions and then share their religious convictions and traditions with others.\textsuperscript{20} It is only when there is a deep understanding of one’s own religious

\textsuperscript{17} Laurent Cleenewerck, “Methods in Ecumenical Dialogue: Lessons from Critical Thinking, Diplomacy and Physical Sciences” (Master of Ecumenical Studies thesis, Ukrainian Catholic University, n.d.), 10.

\textsuperscript{18} Michael Barnes, \textit{Theology and the Dialogue of Religions} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 5.

\textsuperscript{19} Jacques Dupuis, \textit{Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism} (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997), 1-13.

\textsuperscript{20} Jaco Cilliers, “Building Bridges for Interfaith Dialogue,” in \textit{Interfaith Dialogue and Peacebuilding}, ed. David R. Smock (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2002), 48.
beliefs that progress can be made in achieving true understanding and respect for the religious beliefs of others. To that end, interfaith dialogue cannot merely be a polite meeting of participants from different traditions who engage in a pleasant swapping of superficial information.\textsuperscript{21}

It certainly cannot be said that Christian thinkers have been lackadaisical on this matter. Much thought has, in fact, been given to the interaction of the Christian faith with other religions in the past several decades. The thoughtful responses in the Christian world emerging as a result of increasing encounters with other religions has brought about three clusters of thought positions pertaining to the relation of the Christian faith to other religions.\textsuperscript{22} These clusters of thought are widely known to be “exclusivism,” “inclusivism,” and “pluralism.”

One could argue that exclusivist positions arise at least partially but significantly from a fear that interfaith encounters will lead to erosion of the claimed uniqueness of one’s religious truth. José Maria Vigil posits that Christian believers cannot contemplate the theology of religions from a safe distance as if it was an endeavor “outside of and separate from ourselves.” He further explains,

\textit{…it is something that touches us intimately, something that can send our faith and the very meaning of our life into crisis. It may lead us to reinterpret, re-understand, and to express in different ways many formulas that we've been repeating since the earliest days of our childhood, things we always thought were a given—"just because."}\textsuperscript{23}

These possibilities propose to us that it is precisely the fear of erosion of one’s religious convictions stirred by interfaith encounters that has at least partially incited the exclusive vision of the Christian faith in relation to other religions. It is at least in part a self-protectionist framework born out of compulsion.

\textsuperscript{21} Cilliers, “Building Bridges,” 49.

\textsuperscript{22} The terrain of these thought clusters is expounded in Paul Knitter, \textit{No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes to World Religions} (London: SCM Press, 1985); Gavin D’Costa, “Karl Rahner’s Anonymus Christian—A Reappraisal,” \textit{Modern Theology} 1, no. 2 (1986), 131-148; Michael Barnes, \textit{Religions in Conversation} (London: SPCK, 1989).

\textsuperscript{23} Vigil, \textit{Theology of Religious Pluralism}, 17, 18.
Inclusivism does not downplay the uniqueness of particular divine revelation in Jesus Christ despite its attempt to respect the place of other religions in God’s salvation plan, even if they do not possess the fullness of divine revelation. The terminology “anonymous Christian” is employed by Karl Rahner, a definitive proponent of inclusivism, to describe the person “who lives in the state of Christ’s grace through faith, hope, and love, yet who has no explicit knowledge of the fact that his life is orientated in grace-given salvation to Jesus Christ.” He further submits, “[E]ven outside the Christian body there are individuals—and they are to be found even in the rank of atheists—who are justified by God’s grace and possess the Holy Spirit.” Rahner explains that such a person is an anonymous Christian both to others and to himself, for he would utterly deny that he was a Christian or even that he was a believer in God. The inclusivist position seeks to recognize that adherents of all religions are persons and are to be respected despite the fact that all religions possess their own unique truth claims. It holds that an attempt to understand the faith of the other is not a slippery slope to agreement with and, further still, embrace of the truth claims of religions that might stand in contradiction to those of one’s own. Despite such nuanced explanations, inclusivists could be rather easily misunderstood as having compromised the uniqueness of the Christian faith by pandering to a perception that it is merely one alternative among many in a pluralistic context.

At the other extreme of the continuum, the pluralistic angle seems to betray a rather noble and self-effacing consciousness that the assimilation of the religious narratives of other religions into the “Christian metanarrative” would compromise the uniqueness of other religions in accordance with their self-definition. As a reaction to this fear of the self, many thinkers, be they sociologists of religion, philosophers of religion, or religious practitioners, have spiralled into a web of pluralistic worldviews that they think would give rise to a democratization of religions. In a way, one may say, this stems largely from a contrition arising from the Western

24 Karl Rahner, “Observations on the Problem of the Anonymous Christian,” in Theological Investigations, trans. David Bourke (New York: Seabury Press, 1976), 14: 283.
25 Rahner, “Observations,” 291.
26 Barnes, Theology and the Dialogue of Religions, 6.
imperialism of yesteryear, among other probable reasons. John Hick, who stands in contradistinction to Rahner, declares that the time has come for a “Copernican revolution” such that “Christianity, instead of being the center of the religious universe, would, like the other religions, be centered rather on God.”

His “theocentric pluralism” argues that salvation can be attained by way of any religion, which thereby renders moot the unique truth claims of Christianity regarding particular revelation in Jesus Christ and his church. He dubs the claim to Christian uniqueness a “myth” along with the belief in the incarnation of God.

In the light of the perils confronting proponents of the different views on the relationship between the Christian faith and other religions, it would seem that there is no possible “safe” place in which to stand. In the remaining portion of this article, I wish to consider further the pluralistic position on religions as a way to demonstrate why the fear of compromise on the part of the exclusivists (and even the inclusivists) is not unfounded. In particular, I shall attempt to present a reasonably sustained assessment of the underpinning of Raimon Panikkar, whose stance of pluralism some may find to be particularly unique and intriguing. But such a line of thought is also precisely that which brings about a sense of horror on the part of Christian thinkers who are committed to the classical tenets of the Christian truth claims. I also hasten to qualify that this assessment of Panikkar’s pluralistic position is neither intended to be exhaustive nor reflective of the state of scholarship with regard to the said position.

The express goal of this exercise is to demonstrate how some salient aspects undergirding his vision of pluralism give rise to the perils of interfaith dialogue, this being the primary claim posited in my essay.

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27 John Hick, God and the Universe of Faiths: Essays in the Philosophy of Religion (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1973), 125; Francis A. Sullivan SJ, Salvation Outside the Church? Tracing the History of the Church’s Response (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2002), 170.

28 Among others, the following works represent more comprehensive treatments of Panikkar’s philosophy of religion: Joseph Prabhu, ed., The Intercultural Challenge of Raimon Panikkar (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996); Anthony Savari Raj, A New Hermeneutic of Reality: Raimon Panikkar’s Cosmotheandric Vision (New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing, 1998); Erik Ranstrom and Bob Robinson, Without Ceasing to Be a Christian: A Catholic and Protestant Assess the Christological Contribution of Raimon Panikkar (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2017).
**AN ASSESSMENT OF RAIMON PANIKKAR’S COSMOTHEANDRIC VISION**

At the outset, it might be prudent to point out that Panikkar never sought to be a Catholic philosopher or theologian in the true sense of the term. Seeking to understand metaphysical and ontological reality from a perspective of Catholic orthodoxy was never his project. This we can see from his being married and yet continuing in what he thought to be the priestly life, while also considering himself to be at once a monk. Rather, the well-integrated hybridity of his unique form of pluralism most likely arose from his personal multireligious upbringing and experience: “I left [Europe] as a Christian; found myself a Hindu; and I return as a Buddhist, without having ceased to be a Christian.”

Panikkar’s Dialogical Approach in the Light of the Church’s Evangelizing Mission

Panikkar’s transposition of the objective into the subjective, of allowing one’s experience of reality to be subsumed into the essence of dialogue, might very well have been his greatest contribution to dialogical methodology. The result of his approach was, evidently, the radical conversion he experienced, which was reflected in the multiple volumes of his writings that one can reasonably assume to be documentations of his lifelong process of metanoia.

Corresponding with Panikkar’s experiential background is his philosophy of interfaith dialogue. Dialogue, for Panikkar, is not to be employed as an instrument for the propagation of one’s own faith. Instead, dialogue is primarily for one’s own conversion into a greater experience of Reality by way of subjective religious encounter. One can never, therefore, enter into interfaith dialogue in a spirit of self-defense. In dialogue, one has to remain open to, and even reasonably expect, the conversion of one’s own faith in contrast to how one understands it prior to entering into such dialogue. Panikkar might easily agree that this is where Cleenewerck’s

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29 Gerard Hall, SM, ”Multi-Faith Dialogue in Conversation with Raimon Panikkar,” *Australian e-Journal of Theology* 2 (Australia: Australian Catholic University, 2004), 1.
30 Hall, ”Multi-Faith Dialogue”: 2.
“epistemological humility” demonstrates its rightful place and value.  

While it is true that each faith is accompanied by its own interpretive tradition, Panikkar does not view these interpretive traditions as being cast in stone. For him, the onus falls on each generation of believers to redefine its interpretive tradition so as to allow its imagination to advance its practice of faith. Despite religions being intrinsically theological and doctrinal, the goal of dialogue is to help a person along in his journey of encountering truth that transcends the confines of doctrine and theology.

It does indeed seem that Panikkar’s paradigm of dialogue has a single-minded purpose of a kind of apprenticeship in faith, in that one remains constantly open to conversion without seeking the conversion of the other. In other words, interreligious dialogue, for him, is to be premised upon intrareligious dialogue. Although this dialogical approach is admirably humble in attitude, it does not ultimately correspond with the understanding of the Catholic Church on the goal of interfaith dialogue. It must, of course, be clarified that interfaith dialogue is in fact an integral activity in the life of the church, and that this emphasis has been particularly highlighted by the Second Vatican Council in its discussion on the relationship of adherents of other religions to the Catholic Church.

However, what is often overlooked is the nuanced understanding that the mission of the church is an evangelizing one and not simply a dialogical one. In other words, while dialogue is an inherent activity in the carrying out of her evangelizing mission, the end goal of evangelization is proclamation. This was the focus of “Dialogue and Proclamation,” promulgated in 1991 as an extension to and in commemoration of ten years of Nostra Aetate, perhaps for the very reason I have just pointed out. “Dialogue and Proclamation” is not vague in its instruction that the two undertakings of dialogue and proclamation are inseparable and are meant to be conceived in the context of the Church’s evangelizing mission.

31 Cleenewerck, “Methods in Ecumenical Dialogue,” 10.

32 See Nostra Aetate, Declaration on the Relation of the Church to non-Christian Religions, Proclaimed by His Holiness Pope Paul VI, October 28, 1965, 3-4, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html. Also Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1993, https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/__INDEX.HTM, 839-843; hereafter cited in the text as CCC.
The meaning of dialogue is quite clear, in that it refers to

“...all positive and constructive interreligious relations with individuals and communities of other faiths which are directed at mutual understanding and enrichment,” in obedience to truth and respect for freedom. It includes both witness and the exploration of respective religious convictions.33

On this account, Panikkar’s dialogical approach perhaps complies with the requirement for “mutual understanding and enrichment.” It seems even to have acknowledged the need for “obedience to truth,” however this epistemologically loaded term may be defined by his approach. The aspect of “witness” is what we find to be missing or, at least, severely lacking in the approach. Evangelii Nuntiandi highlights the imperative of dialogue being undertaken with the aim of proclamation (or synonymously, witness) in mind:

Evangelization will also always contain—as the foundation, centre, and at the same time, summit of its dynamism—a clear proclamation that, in Jesus Christ, the Son of God made man, who died and rose from the dead, salvation is offered to all men, as a gift of God’s grace and mercy.34

In this regard, “Dialogue and Proclamation” does not leave the perceiver to guess the meaning of proclamation, which is

...the communication of the Gospel message, the mystery of salvation realized by God for all in Jesus Christ by the power of the Spirit. It is an invitation to a commitment of faith in Jesus Christ and to entry through baptism into the community of believers which is the Church. (DaP 10)

33 Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, Dialogue and Proclamation: Reflection and Orientations on Interreligious Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, 1991, 9, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interelg/documents/rc_pc_interelg_doc_19051991_dialogue-and-proclamation_en.html; hereafter cited in the text as DaP.

34 Evangelii Nuntiandi, Apostolic Exhortation of His Holiness Pope Paul VI to the Episcopate, to the Clergy and to All the Faithful of the Entire World, December 8, 1975, 27, https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi.html (emphasis mine).
Evidently, the essence of the Christian proclamation is the *kerygma* itself, that is, the redemptive mission of Jesus Christ. Panikkar’s dialogical approach does not seem to leave room for such proclamation, since the onus of openness to religious experience is self-directed and cannot be expected also of the other. Certainly, there can be arguments in favor of Panikkar’s approach, as its seemingly egalitarian merits may be more pronounced in situations of extreme conflict in certain societies. However, the purpose of my assessment is not so much to point out if his approach is more affably enlightened than that of the church’s position or where it may be profitably employed, but merely to establish that it does not reflect the Catholic Church’s dialogical purpose in relation to her evangelizing mission. In any case, it is yet to be demonstrated that the virtuous attitude of openness that seeks to avoid prejudice and cultivates an openness of mind and heart beyond superficial pleasantries (which would most certainly assuage mutual suspicion among dialogical partners) can be cultivated without undermining “profound loyalty towards one’s own tradition.”

This is all the more pronounced when one considers Panikkar’s insistence that we can never truly understand one’s faith unless we embrace the faith as our own: “A Christian will never fully understand Hinduism if he is not, in one way or another, converted to Hinduism. Nor will a Hindu ever fully understand Christianity unless he, in one way or another, becomes a Christian.”

According to Gerard Hall, SM, Panikkar’s approach calls for the integration of one’s experience of the other’s “symbolic world…into one’s own tradition.”

Another possible response to Panikkar’s dialogical approach would perhaps be to explore, from a sociopsychological viewpoint, whether it may not be so that religious conviction, by its very nature, intrinsically seeks to perpetuate and propagate itself. At a risk of extending beyond the scope of this article, one might not be going too far to argue that Panikkar’s premise of openness to conversion by way of dialogue is counterintuitive to the very nature of religion, which inherently insists that it be communicated and passed on in the same way it was received. One would be hard-pressed

35 Raimon Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*, 2nd ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1981), 35.
36 Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*, 43.
37 Hall, “Multi-Faith Dialogue,” 5.
to justify one’s fidelity to a particular religion if one had to subject its practice, tenets, language, and worldview to heavy revisions as a result of subjective encounter. To further extrapolate this case, even if such an enterprise was deemed acceptable, the result of it would be a multiplicity of hybrid religious encounters and experiences that looked nothing like one another. The subjective personalization of such religious encounters would render organized religion impossible, and there would be nothing concrete from which the individual in dialogue could experience and, consequently, nothing into which to convert. While Panikkar’s approach seeks to reach beyond doctrinal and theological confines in order to move toward the attainment of ultimate truth, the consequence of this very approach itself could backfire and regress into a counter-universalization of truth that is shared by a particular religious community.

Panikkar’s Cosmotheandric Vision as a Unique Form of Pluralism

To be sure, pluralism for Panikkar is not to be constructed in the way it is commonly understood. He means it more as an attitude than as a methodology. He is therefore not a proponent of subsuming all religious worldviews under a universal umbrella the way John Hick does, for that would mean sacrificing the uniqueness of each religious tradition. He is neither a minimalist nor a reductionist in this regard. Neither does he propose the watering down of all religions to a lowest common denominator, for again, that would entail diluting each religion of its specific truth claims. He advocates pluralism as a means of experiencing the realities of the other by way of openness such that one immerses oneself into the otherness of the other and makes sense of the ensuing experience.

Pluralism in its ultimate sense is not the tolerance of a diversity of systems under a larger umbrella. It is not a supersystem.... The problem of pluralism arises when we are confronted with mutually irreconcilable worldviews or ultimate systems of thought and life. Pluralism has to do with final, unbridgeable human attitudes.... We speak then of two different, mutually complementary, although apparently opposite, attitudes, beliefs, or whatever.38

38 Raimon Panikkar, “Invisible Harmony: A Universal Theory or a Cosmic Confidence,” in Toward a Universal Theology in Religion, ed. Leonard Swidler, Faith Meets Faith Series (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987), 125.
To be specific, the unique form of pluralism proposed by Panikkar is what he terms the “cosmotheandric vision” of ultimate reality. Since it is beyond the scope of this article to delve into the minute details of this astute mindset, I propose only to examine the basic premises upon which the cosmotheandric vision is constructed. Hall succinctly sums up the three fundamental premises of Panikkar’s cosmotheandric vision as follows:

Three assumptions lay behind Panikkar’s cosmotheandric vision. The first is that reality is ultimately harmonious. It is neither a monolithic unity nor sheer diversity and multiplicity. Second, reality is radically relational and interdependent so that every reality is constitutionally connected to all other realities: “every being is nothing but relatedness.” There is, if you like, organic unity and dynamic process where every “part” of the whole “participates” in or “mirrors” the whole. This corresponds to the ancient notion that every reality is a microcosm of the macro-universe. A contemporary version would be the Gaia principle. Third, reality is symbolic, both pointing to and participating in something beyond itself. We do not have a God separate from the world, a world that is purely material, nor humans that are reducible to their own thought-processes or cultural expressions. While it is important to recognise the “symbolic difference” between God and the world, as between one religion and another, for Panikkar, all cultures, religions and peoples are relationally and symbolically entwined with each other, with the world in which we live, and with an ultimate divine reality.39

Speaking of the irreconcilability of worldviews typically implies the application of value judgment upon the worldview of the other, and this is especially so when we are confronted by a worldview that seems to stand on an opposing side. However, Panikkar’s cosmotheandric vision calls for a suspension of value judgment when we enter into interfaith dialogue, to allow ourselves to be absorbed into the faith experience of the other in order to be encountered by it, and then to voluntarily permit this experience to permeate our own established perceptions in such a way that it is malleably reconfigured. Interfaith dialogue, in his understanding, is therefore transformational and requires the subject to embrace a posture of vulnerability to the conversion experience.

39 Hall, "Multi-Faith Dialogue," 8.
Panikkar takes issue with the fact that interfaith dialogue has always been merely an instrument for the preservation of peace and mutual understanding. Dialogue between persons, for him, is not to be instrumental for a purpose outside of our “creaturehood.” It is an end in itself and not a means to an end. In other words, the dialogue itself is the point. Implicit in his contention is the assumption that philosophy of dialogue shapes its very praxis. His observation is correct that interfaith dialogue has until now taken place on a “merely objective or the purely subjective level.”

In the former case, participants assume that they are able to suspend their subjective sentiments toward matters, even toward their dialogue partners, and lock their encounters in at the level of dogmatic discourse. In the latter instance, participants seek to encounter one another at the level of experience and relationships. But he pushes his case further by employing the argument that beings engage with one another, not externally, but by entering into the being of one another in such a way that “[t]here is a kind of perichoresis, ‘dwelling within one another,’ of these three dimensions of Reality: the Divine, the Human, and the Cosmic.”

One must admit that his employment of the traditional trinitarian terms applied by the Cappadocian Fathers to their descriptions of the Holy Trinity is indeed nothing short of captivating.

Further to that, in seemingly being somewhat influenced by Martin Buber’s “I and Thou” frame of thought, Panikkar propagates the necessity of intimacy and communion in dialogue, without which it cannot be true dialogue. Without a willingness to enter fully into the other as well as identifying the other as being a part of oneself, the one who is supposed to be a “Thou” can only go as far as being a “non-I.” In fact, Panikkar does not limit such communion only to the relationship among human beings, but also between humanity and other members of creation.

He acknowledges that this model of dialogue constitutes a religious act in itself. But if that is so, then it must register that such a religious act cannot be prescribed as one that is held agreeable by the standards of

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40 Raimon Panikkar, The Intra-religious Dialogue (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1999), xv.
41 Raimon Panikkar, “The Myth of Pluralism: The Tower of Babel—A Meditation on Non-Violence,” Cross Currents 29, no. 2 (1979): 214-216.
42 Martin Buber, I And Thou, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1937).
all religious tenets. To begin with, it is understandable that, in the light of Panikkar’s sense of interconnectedness between the divine and the human, the divine perichoresis that is intrinsic in the Being of God must also be transposable to the human experience, perhaps with (or without) some measure of qualification. This imperative stems from Panikkar’s own premise that all of reality—the divine, the human, and the cosmic—exists as a “radical Trinity,” of which the classical Christian dogma on the Trinity is a mere inspired but symbolic formulation. However, from a traditional Christian viewpoint, the perichoresis that he advocates may reflect a confusion in his employment of the term and its meaning, or at the very least, his application of it (and this could, admittedly, have been intentional). Perichoresis refers to God’s intrinsic state of existence in which he also desires humanity to participate. Humanity’s capacity to participate in this perichoresis is contingent upon God’s own intrinsic perichoretic existence and not independent of it. To assume that humanity can transcend into a greater awareness of a perichoretic existence in which it actually already exists is therefore a questionable presumption at best. Communion between humanity and the divine is an ultimate end that we seek, not merely an awareness of a fait accompli. Panikkar’s use of the term perichoresis must therefore be seen as a revision that is not faithful to its meaning that is inherent in classical Catholic Christianity.

Furthermore, surely there are certain religious worldviews from which the imperative of dialogue, or the necessity of understanding the other, is absent. In fact, there exist certain religious worldviews that exhibit more insular tendencies and that do not even seek to be understood. A seemingly forceful insistence that religious people should engage in such dialogue as a religious act, as it were, by virtue of our being, seems to have universalized the makeup of every being and genericized our compatibilities in the light of our createdness. But createdness does not automatically imply sameness in terms of the dialogical capacities of our varied worldviews, and if the sameness of all creatures in this regard was a universal fact, then ongoing clashes among religious communities (and even within religious communities themselves) should be nonexistent. In other words, if all religions had the appetite for dialogue in accordance with Panikkar’s

43 Raimon Panikkar, “The Radical Trinity,” in The Rhythm of Being: The Gifford Lectures (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2010), chapter 5.
approach, then the natural outcome of disagreement should be dialogue, whereas this does not at all seem innate to every civilization. Conversely, if some religions portray a greater depth of openness to interfaith dialogue while some others exhibit hostile resistance to it, in what way are they still to be construed as being “symbolically entwined with each other” or being equally parts of a harmonious whole?  

Panikkar also seems totally to ignore the role of the fallenness of the cosmos in humanity’s possible distorted images and perceptions of God apart from divine self-revelation to his holy church. This is not to say that there is nothing true or good, or even holy, in other religions. The Catholic Church recognizes in other religions that search, among shadows and images, for the God who is unknown yet near since He gives life and breath and all things and wants all men to be saved. Thus, the Church considers all goodness and truth found in these religions as “a preparation for the Gospel…” (CCC 843)

Notwithstanding that there is “goodness and truth” to be found in all religions, the Catholic Church does not say that all religions are equal or that all religions have equal capacity to bring salvation to humanity. In fact, the Catechism of the Catholic Church also speaks of how “in their religious behavior…men also display the limits and errors that disfigure the image of God in them” (CCC 844). It necessarily follows that a dependence on our own recognition of revelation, even if it is undertaken in collective fashion, is distorted at best. This is why the accompanying guidance of the Holy Spirit must also be incorporated into the Christian understanding of our ecclesial recognition of divine revelation. Evidently, the utter openness propagated by Panikkar’s approach may not sit comfortably with the Catholic Church’s conception of existing antithetical articles of belief among the various religious traditions.

However, because of his insistence on perichoresis and communion, Panikkar in effect abolishes in totality the reality of exclusive truth claims and asserts that if dialogue is to take place effectively, one must be converted fully into the being of the other, all this without so much as diminishing that which one previously was prior to this encounter. In effect, this must mean that there is no contradiction between being Christian and being

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44 Hall, "Multi-Faith Dialogue,” 8.
Hindu, and that it is even possible to be bi-religious or even tri-religious as he has claimed himself to be. After all, according to Panikkar, “each religion represents the whole for that particular group and in a certain way ‘is’ the religion of the other group only in a different topological form.”\(^{45}\) Again, this is certainly not to say that there is nothing that can be learned from religious traditions outside one’s own. But learning, and total vulnerability to assimilation so as to emerge with a hybrid religious creature that may in the first place look almost nothing like the one into which one claims to be assimilated, are two distinct attitudes altogether.

Panikkar’s construction could be construed as religious humanism packaged as a kind of philosophical pantheism (but not pantheism in the conventional sense, for he rejects the notion of oneness without distinction), and this is well summed up in his own words: “We are constitutionally open—not only because the whole universe can penetrate us, but also because we can permeate all of reality.”\(^ {46}\) In other words, he speaks of humanity not as a part of the order of creation, but as a microcosm of the created world itself. This view seems not to tolerate a world characterized by radical difference and disagreement, for in the final analysis, everyone and everything must be harmoniously “subsumed” into one another in accordance with what Panikkar has ascribed to the radical trinitarian order arising from “cosmotheandric perichoresis.”\(^ {47}\) In the process of this endeavor, his brand of pluralism implicitly persuades us to turn our attention away from the Creator toward the “self” within and the “self” without. After all, in his estimation, “There is no matter without spirit and no spirit without matter, no World without Man, no God without the universe, etc. God, Man, and World are three ‘artificially substantivized forms of the three primordial adjectives which describe Reality.’”\(^ {48}\) This substantiates the third premise of Panikkar’s cosmotheandric vision as identified by Hall, that “all cultures, religions and peoples are relationally and symbolically entwined with each other, with the world in which we live, and with an ultimate

\(^{45}\) Panikkar, The Intra-religious Dialogue, 18.

\(^{46}\) Panikkar, The Intra-religious Dialogue, xviii.

\(^{47}\) Raimon Panikkar, Christophany: The Fullness of Man (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2004), 396.

\(^{48}\) Raimon Panikkar, “Philosophy as Lifestyle,” in Philosophers on Their Own Work, ed. A. Mercier and M. Svilar (Berne and Frankfurt-am-Main: Peter Lang, 1978), 206.
divine reality.” There is, in the final analysis, only Reality, and God is its creation. In fact, Reality is God.

Indeed, Panikkar’s cosmotheandric vision does not seek to escape from the modern proclivity for self-absorption. Although he would readily purport that humanity is not above the divine, the actuality of the divine certainly seems to be subject to the tyranny of human perceptual limitations, since the divine does not exist apart from the human. While Panikkar might have vehemently detested such a criticism, his approach is quite entirely reminiscent of the Enlightenment accentuation of the power of human reason in the pursuit of truth. That which Immanuel Kant claimed in 1784 to be the motto of the Enlightenment—“Have courage to use your own reason” (sapere aude)—gave rise to the critical employment of human rationality, independent of authority, traditions, and religious assertions. The difference, in Panikkar’s case, would perhaps be that human reason is employed for an integration of the divine into the subjective human experience rather than for the negation of the divine. Furthermore, religious tradition is employed as a mere springboard for the enablement of this project rather than being considered an authoritative path to ensure one’s fidelity to faith.

**Concluding Remarks**

The aim of this article has not been to offer an exhaustive assessment of Panikkar’s cosmotheandric vision. What I have sought to provide is a limited and general assessment of Panikkar’s unique paradigm of dialogue in the context of my submission that interfaith dialogue is necessary but inherently perilous to adherents of traditional organized religion.

One can easily understand, from Panikkar’s assertions regarding interfaith dialogue, how Christian thinkers who are committed to the classical tenets of the Christian faith might pander to a fear of such extreme compromise and insist on keeping within the margins of safety and self-protectionism that border on non-interaction with other religions. In actuality, both positions are probably motivated by fear of different sorts, which does disservice to authentic dialogue among religions.

49 Hall, “Multi-Faith Dialogue,” 8.
50 Isaac Kramnick, *The Portable Enlightenment Reader* (New York: Penguin Books, 1995), 1.
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