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Raimon Panikkar, 'apostle of inter-faith dialogue,' dies

Joseph Prabhu | Aug. 31, 2010

Raimon Panikkar (photo by Ilvio Gallo)

Professor Raimon Panikkar, one of the greatest scholars of the 20th century in the areas of comparative religion, theology, and inter-religious dialogue, died at his home in Tavertet, near Barcelona, Spain, Aug. 26. He was 91.

Panikkar taught and lived in the United States from 1966-1987 and was known to generations of students here and around the world through both his lectures and his many books. What they heard and read were the arresting reflections of a multi-dimensional person, who was simultaneously a philosopher, theologian, mystic, priest and poet.

Panikkar was born the son of an Indian Hindu father and a Spanish Catholic mother Nov. 3, 1918. He received a conventional Catholic education at a Jesuit high school in Barcelona before launching his university studies in the natural sciences, philosophy, and theology, first in Barcelona and then in Madrid. Shortly thereafter, the Spanish Civil War broke out, and Panikkar was able to take advantage of his status as the son of a father who was a British citizen to go to the University of Bonn in Germany to continue his studies. When World War II started in 1939, Panikkar returned to Spain and completed the first of his three doctorates, this one in philosophy, at the University of Madrid in 1946.

It was around 1940 that he met Escriva de Balaguer, the founder of Opus Dei, with whom he had a close relationship. It was at Escriva's urging that he trained for the Catholic priesthood and was ordained in 1946. Panikkar continued to be associated with Opus Dei for about twenty years, breaking effectively with the organization only in the early 1960s. He was tight-lipped about this period of his life, saying only that he did not regret it. It is clear, however, when one compares the Panikkar of the 1940s and the early 1950s with the later Panikkar better known to the world as a pioneer of inter-religious dialogue, that he had moved a long way from his early roots.

In late 1954 when he was already 36, Panikkar visited India, the land of his father, for the first time. It proved to be a watershed, a decisive reorientation of his interests and of his theology.

He had entered a dramatically new world, religious and cultural, from the Catholic Europe of his youth. The transformation was aided by his meetings and close friendship with three monks, who like him were attempting

to live and to incarnate the Christian life in Indian, predominantly Hindu and Buddhist forms: Jules Monchanin (1895-1957), Henri Le Saux, also know as Swami Abhishiktananda (1910-1973), and Bede Griffiths, the English Benedictine monk (1906-1993). All four of them, in different ways, discovered and cherished the riches and the deep spiritual wisdom of the Indic traditions, and attempted to live out and express their core Christian convictions in Hindu and Buddhist forms. To some extent this multiple belonging was made possible by their embrace of *Advaita*, the Indic idea of non-dualism, which sees the deep, often hidden, connections between traditions without in any way minimizing the differences between them.

One of Panikkar's many striking sentences looking back on his life's journey asserts: "I left Europe [for India] as a Christian, I discovered I was a Hindu and returned as a Buddhist without ever having ceased to be a Christian." A wealth of meaning lies in that assertion. Christianity in its historical evolution began as a Jewish tradition and then spread to the Greco-Roman world, acquiring along the way Greek and Roman cultural expressions which have given it a certain form and character. Panikkar, having grown up and having been trained in a traditional Catholic and neo-Thomist environment, had a profound knowledge of, and respect for, that tradition. This knowledge prepared him for discussions with some of the great minds of 20th-century Catholicism: Jean Danielou, Yves Congar, Hans Urs von Balthazar, and others. He was also invited to take part in the Synod of Rome and the Second Vatical Council. But Panikkar did not confuse or conflate historical contingency with spiritual truth. In Hinduism and Buddhism Panikkar found other languages, in addition to Biblical Hebrew, Greek philosophy, and Latin Christianity, to express the core convictions (the *kerygma*) of the Christian tradition.

That was the main thesis of *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*, which Panikkar originally presented as a doctoral thesis to the Lateran University in Rome in 1961, based as it was on a close textual comparison between Thomas Aquinas and Sankara's interpretation of a canonical Hindu scripture, the Brahma-Sutras. Christ and his teaching are not, so Panikkar argues, the monopoly or exclusive property of Christianity seen as a historical religion. Rather, Christ is the universal symbol of divine-human unity, the human face of God. Christianity approaches Christ in a particular and unique way, informed by its own history and spiritual evolution. But Christ vastly transcends Christianity. Panikkar calls the name "Christ" the "Supername," in line with St. Paul's "name above every name" (Phil 2:9), because it is a name that can and must assume other names, like Rama or Krishna or Ishvara.

This theological insight was crucial for Panikkar because it provided the basis of the inter-religious dialogue that he and Abhishiktananda and Bede Griffiths were both advocating and practicing themselves. Far from diluting or in any way watering down core Christian beliefs and practices, such dialogue, in addition to fostering inter-religious understanding and harmony provided an indispensable medium for deepening the Christian faith. Such dialogue provides an insight and entry point into other, non-Christian names and manifestations of Christ. This was particularly important for Panikkar because together with other Asian theologians he saw how historical Christianity had attempted, especially during its colonial periods, to convert Christ into an imperial God, with a license to conquer and triumph over other Gods. This for Panikkar is **the challenge** of the post-colonial period inaugurated in the mid-to-late twentieth century and continuing into our present and the future. In his words, "To the third Christian millennium is reserved the task of overcoming a tribal Christology 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."

Needless-to-say, such striking ideas carefully and rigorously argued and dramatically expressed got the attention of religious thinkers and secular institutions around the world. Panikkar was invited to teach in Rome and then at Harvard (1966-1971) and the University of California, Santa Barbara (1971-1987). He was now, as Leonard Swidler, occupant of the Chair of Catholic Thought at Temple University, called him, "the apostle of inter-faith dialogue and inter-cultural understanding."

Conversant in a dozen or so languages and fluent in at least six, he traveled tirelessly around the world, lecturing, writing, preaching, and conducting retreats. His famous Easter service in his Santa Barbara days would attract visitors from all corners of the globe. Well before dawn they would climb up the mountain near his home in Montecito, meditate quietly in the darkness once they reached the top, and then salute the sun as it arose over the horizon. Panikkar would bless the elements ? air, earth, water and fire ? and all the surrounding forms of life ? plant, animal, and human ? and then celebrate Mass and the Eucharist. It was a profound "cosmotheandric" celebration with the human, cosmic, and divine dimensions of life being affirmed, reverenced, and brought into a deep harmony. The celebration after the formal service at Panikkar's home resembled in some respects the feast of Pentecost as described in the New Testament, where peoples of many tongues engaged in animated conversation.

At the center of these celebrations, retreats, and lectures stood Panikkar himself and his arresting personality. People who heard or encountered him could not help but be struck by this physically small man who packed a punch and who 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.

Not surprisingly, universities around the world, Catholic and non-Catholic, invited him to give lectures. To mention just a few among hundreds delivered, he was invited to give the William Noble Lecture at Harvard in 1973, the Thomas Merton Lecture at Columbia in 1982, and the Cardinal Bellarmine Lecture at the University of St. Louis in 1991. The most prestigious invitation, however, came from the University of Edinburgh, where Panikkar delivered the Gifford Lectures in 1989. These have recently been published by Orbis Books as The Rhythm of Being [1]. Panikkar thus joined the select company of William James, Karl Barth, Albert Schweitzer, and Reinhold Niebuhr to mention just a few of the most famous Gifford lecturers. He was in fact the first Indian and the first Asian invited to give these lectures.

Some of Panikkar's other well-known books are *The Vedic Experience*; *The Intrareligious Dialogue*; *Myth, Faith, and Hermeneutics*; *The Silence of God*; *The Cosmotheandric Experience*; and *The Invisible Harmony*. Jaca Books in Italy is bringing out his collected works (*Omnia Opera*) in some 30 volumes, and Continuum Books in England and the Untied States is planning an English edition. There is also a helpful Web site www.raimonpanikkar.org.

Ours is a new era in world history, where thanks to globalization and the increasing communication between cultures and religions it is vital that there be a well-developed Catholic theology of religions. Panikkar was one of the pioneering and paradigmatic theologians of this new era. He has left us a rich and many-sided legacy from the liturgical and pastoral to the theological and sapiential. It behooves us who follow him to notice, absorb, and extend that legacy.

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