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TRINITY AS AN ALL-EMBRACING REALITY
A Study Based on Raimon Panikkar's
Understanding of Trinity

Benoy Joseph, MSFS ♦

University: Ludwig-Maximilians-University in Munich

Faculty: Theology

Director: Rev. Prof. Dr Peter Neuner

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Trinity as an All-embracing Reality is an attempt to present Raimon Panikkar's Trinitarian understanding. The Christian doctrine of the Trinity is seen as an underlying structure of all reality. Panikkar develops his thought on the Trinity based on his cosmotheandric vision of reality. He claims that the threefold pattern *Theos-anthropos-cosmos* are invariants of all religions and cultures. The divine, the human and the earthly are the three irreducible dimensions which constitute any reality in as much as it is real. Therefore reality is radically relational and interdependent. On this vision Panikkar develops his hermeneutics which he applies to mythos, faith and logos. In all intersubjective communications and modes of discourses,

♦**Father Benoy Joseph**, belongs to the religious congregation, Missionaries of Saint Francis de Sales. He is currently teaching in India. Email: benoymsfs@googlemail.com

these categories operate in relation to one another. There is a constant flow from mythos to logos through faith. The logos and mythos are the tools that enable one to understand reality. While logos is concerned with word, language and expression, mythos is concerned with the unspoken, unexpressed and non-linguistic dimension of human knowing. Thus it can be said mythos is the unconscious realm and logos is the conscious realm of human mind. Panikkar's hermeneutics paves a way for an interreligious dialogue in the pluralistic context, which he believes to be the kairos of our time. In his attempt to bring about union between religions and cultures, Panikkar believes that the theology of Trinity and Christology play a vital role. In this dissertation an attempt is made to explore the Trinitarian theology of Panikkar in the context of world religions especially of Hinduism and Buddhism.

In his interpretation of the Trinity Panikkar retains the core of the traditional concept of the Trinity and tries to reinterpret it in a relevant and intelligible manner to his eastern audience. In doing so Panikkar finds that western terminologies are insufficient to make Christianity and its doctrines intelligible to the eastern mind. Thus he makes use of eastern terminologies to interpret the core Christian doctrine of the Trinity. Just as Greek philosophy helped Christian doctrine to develop and mature in Europe, the intuitions of Hinduism and Buddhism may help to understand the Trinitarian mystery in India better. It is with this intention that Panikkar explored Hindu philosophies particularly the philosophy of Sankara. He attempted to integrate Hindu as well as Buddhist religious experience and their philosophies towards an understanding of the Trinity and of Christology. His main dialogue partner is the *Advaita Vedanta* school of Hinduism. He makes use of the concepts of the *Advaita Vedanta* school as well as *Pratityasamutpada* or the radical relativity in Buddhism in order to interpret the Trinity.

Panikkar equates the Father with the Absolute. He says this absolute has no name. It can be called also Brahman or Tao, or the great silence in Buddhism. In all these terms a Christian can glimpse a reflection of the Father. In Christian tradition the absolute is called the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. In *Advaita Vedanta* school of Hinduism Brahman is absolute and transpersonal. There are two forms of Brahman, the *nirguna* Brahman (Brahman without attributes) and the *saguna* Brahman (Brahman with attributes). Panikkar tries to make a connection between the first person of the Trinity and the *nirguna* Brahman. According to him the Father has all the attributes of *nirguna* Brahman. Now the question is how can the Brahman who is absolute,

transcendent and non-relational relate to the world without losing its absoluteness? In order to answer this question we need a link between the absolute Brahman and this world. And according to Advaita it is *Isvara* who provides the link. If there is no link then there emerges a dualism which can destroy both the concepts of Brahman as well as of the world. Both would be equally ultimate and self sufficient realities. But if Brahman is regarded as a person, he has to relate to other persons and things, that means he has to compromise his absoluteness. Therefore Panikkar is of the opinion that it is *Isvara* who is the personal aspect of Brahman. He is the Brahman with attributes.

For Panikkar this *Isvara* is equivalent to what Christian tradition calls Christ. As *Isvara* manifests the absoluteness of Brahman, Christ manifests the absoluteness of the Father. Panikkar does not simply compare God the Father with Brahman or Christ with *Isvara*. He knows such a comparison can only be dangerous and beside the point. So the relation between *Isvara* and Christ is not an identity or an analogy. He calls this relationship *homeomorphic*. That is: two notions play equivalent role within their respective systems. The role of *Isvara* in Vedanta corresponds functionally to the role of Christ in Christian thought. It is precisely this correspondence that provides Indian philosophy with a locus for Christ and Christian theology for *Isvara*. This allows Panikkar to call the reality behind the name *Isvara* as the 'unknown Christ of Hinduism.'

According to Panikkar this link between the absolute and the relative can be called by different names. One may call it Lord or *Isvara* or Christ. Christians call this meeting point Christ. But Christ is according to Panikkar not at all the monopoly of Christians, he is not merely the historical person of Jesus of Nazareth. In his understanding of Christ, Panikkar emphasises the trans-historical dimension of Christ. Therefore he makes attempts to distance Christ from history. To him Christ is the cosmic or universal Christ as he appears in Pauline letters (e.g. 1 Cor 8:6; Col 1:16-20; 3:11; Eph 1:10; 23). The historical person Jesus of Nazareth can not embrace what the cosmic Christ is.

The Spirit is the revelation of God immanent. The spirit goes forth from the Father and the Son and is immanent in the world. The fundamental urge of Hinduism is to discover and realize the Spirit within Human soul. Panikkar is of the opinion that Hinduism can greatly contribute towards a deeper theology of the Spirit. According to the *Upanisads*, the *atman* is said to be identical with Brahman.

When the Brahman is understood as transcendental, the *atman* is the immanent. One who unites this two is actually the Spirit.

Panikkar, in his Trinitarian theology, describes three aspects of the divinity as well as three forms of spirituality. He relates the silent aphophatic dimension to the Father, the personalistic dimension to the Son, and the immanent dimension to the Spirit. In developing this concept, he makes use of three spiritual experiences. The *Karma-marga* (*the way of action*) is considered to be the spirituality of the Father, the transcendent God; the *Bhakti-marga* (*the way of devotion*) is referred to as the spirituality of the Son, who is encountered in love; and the *Jnana-marga* (*the way of knowledge*) is the spirituality of the Holy Spirit, who is found through inner experience.

In his attempts to deal with all non-Christian traditions collectively, Panikkar in his later writings transcends the traditional parameters and proposes a radical understanding of the Trinity and Christology, which goes beyond the early Trinitarian dogmas which were formulated in Nicea, Constantinople and Chalcedon. He surpasses the boundaries of Christendom to be more cosmological and more universal. His knowledge of the eastern religious myths and the religious experience of the other traditions has helped him to rise above the inclusivistic understanding to a pluralistic theo-centrism in which the Christic principle takes precedence to the history and saving significance of Jesus of Nazareth. Thus his attempt to present the biblical message to the Indian context is a great step towards a genuine Indian theology.

The Trinitarian understanding of Panikkar meets the requirements and challenges of our times, namely, those of religious pluralism, inter-religious dialogue and the encounter of world spiritualities. In the context of religious pluralism Panikkar demands a revision of the prevailing Christology or the acceptance of other concepts of Christological understanding. He replaces the traditional Christology with a new concept which he calls Christophany. It represents the Christian reflection on Christ together with the self understanding of other religions and traditions. This would open a way for an interreligious dialogue.

To Panikkar it is exactly the reality of the Trinity itself which urges Christians to engage in dialogue. The concept of Trinity presents not a monarchic but a sharing God, a God who is interacting and participating. Through revelation we have come to know God as a Trinity of persons among whom there is constant interchange and perfect communion. This provides a lofty model for our relations

with our fellow human beings. These relations are to be imbued with respect for the identity of each person and a strong desire to achieve communion. His notion of Trinity is the key and foundational source in dealing with the non-Christian traditions. In a multi-religious, multi-cultural society, the Trinity urges us to enter into inter-religious dialogue, inter-denominational cooperation and to maintain a participating outlook. Therefore the doctrine of the Trinity is not only inspiring the Christian Church, but also other religions and it is a challenge to the human society as a whole.

Panikkar's insights could play a vital role in our cross-cultural and multi-religious context. His theological vision offers every reader an opportunity to expand one's imagination, to sharpen one's critical faculties and heighten the awareness of what are the fundamental issues in our world today and how they may be approached. The mystery of the triune God, the Trinity, offers the ultimate model, because in it we can find both unity and diversity. Panikkar's work gives us a paradigm to bring about unity between religions and cultures. And I believe along with Panikkar this union of religions is the *kairos* of our time.

The insights of Panikkar are met with apparent criticisms, particularly referring to his later writings on Christology and Trinity. The early Panikkar seems to have lime lighted the uniqueness of Jesus Christ and the absoluteness of Christianity. But the later Panikkar bypasses the early Christian dogmas of Nicea, Constantinople and Chalcedon. In this dissertation these criticisms are duly referred. Nevertheless it should be noted that Panikkar wanted to present a theological concept which contextualizes the biblical message in Indian thinking. The question of Panikkar is how the biblical message could have looked like when it were unfolded in Indian and not in Greek/western context. Then it is obvious that it would have taken a different form than that of early Christian councils. Panikkar's insights deserve to be regarded as a step towards the development of a genuine Indian theology which at the same time is open to intercultural dialogue.