

Raimundo Panikkar
Barcelona, Spain

A NEW VISION OF REALITY (A TRIBUTE TO FR. BEDE GRIFFITHS)

Dear Friend,

It must have been in 1955, when I had the privilege of spending with you the first six months of your indian pilgrimage. We tried to come in close contact with the people. And this we did without knowing kannada or tamil. We studied some sanskrit however. We did look at the stones too, which in forms of statues and temples are also part of the people. Nobody is an isolated individual.

You have written about yourself and other persons have already written about you. I do not need to repeat anything. I may perhaps disclose a little of what I know about your inner pilgrimage.

You are now well established and have realized your ideal. Founder, *ācārya*, guru, a well-known *svāmi* and, of course, a controversial figure at that. There is a rather unique *paramparā* (lineage) linking you with the Saccidānanda Ashram of Fr. Monchanin and Ābhishiktānanda via *svāmi* Francis Acharya. This history, as far as I know, needs still to be written. That old portuguese saying that God writes straight with crooked lines could also apply here. Although I have been connected with Shantivanam since 1954 I do not feel entitled to write the story. But I can bear witness to your endurance, your fidelity, your passing through the dark night of misunderstandings, not-understandings, and obstacles, of all sorts. You never lost your confidence when you were practically prevented to carry on your ideal. You remained loyal to your commitments, but you never ceased to believe that there was a possibility for you of a truly contemplative life on the soil of India, even if the wind had carried the seeds from other shores. You passed through a long purification. And if today people speak of 'success' (although this would not be my language) it is because you have really died to yourself. During long years you practised your *sādhana* (discipline) without knowing if there would be an end to the tunnel.

Not only you did not lose courage, you did not lose your identity either. This book is a proof of it. You were not just interested in India or in a restricted notion of indic spirituality. You were, since the beginning, interested in *A New Vision of Reality*. And here is the fruit of a whole life search. Let me, then, gloss briefly your most recent book without giving a summary of it.

Admired Author

You do not claim to do the work of a scholar. The beauty of the book lies in its simplified overview; it is the work of a sage who offers us a unified vision of the present day state of affairs. You make accessible the most sophisticated systems of thought be they philosophical or scientific. Your choice is obviously a selection, and it has a theological leading thread which you do not hide. Perhaps the complete title of your essay could have been *A New Christian Vision of Reality*. But obviously, for you, this second adjective is almost superfluous. For you, who are not sectarian, the Christian View is synonymous with a True View, without saying for a moment that it is the only true view. Your pluralism is welcomed and refreshing. If your language likes to be more universal, your accent is christian. Everybody speaks a language, and with an accent. I know that you do not intend the book to be specifically christian. You want to speak to the larger human contemporary community, using a modern language. But is this not the aspiration of most enlightened christians today? Christians seem to have attempted to speak always a catholic, i.e., universal language. This is why today they prefer to speak a secular language and feel so comfortable with the scientific world.

Three points emerge, in my opinion, from your presentation. First of all, your interest in Contemporary Science. You take it seriously. You have avoided the pitfall of delving into the ultimately pseudo-problems of 'reason and faith', 'religion and science'. You have discovered that there is a break between Modern Science and Contemporary Science, and that the latter offers, at least, a splendid metaphor to understand the more traditional visions of the world. A spirituality which neglects to integrate the insights of Contemporary Science is not fit for our times. However, the great challenge to contemporary 'spirituality' does not come so much from Contemporary Science as from *Secularity*, this latter understood as the insight that the spatio-

temporal structure of the world is real and not just an irrelevant epiphenomenon which spiritual Man can dispense with. This world is real, our human and spiritual pilgrimage cannot overlook the socio-economic and scientific sensitiveness of our contemporaries. This conviction has triggered modern scientific creativity. Modern Science is the outcome of the spirit of secularity. Space and time are real structures of Reality worth investigating.

It is interesting to note that your heuristic and ontological leading thread is precisely the reality of time. Contemporary Science helps you to overcome any vedântic or post-Kantian idealism and to stress that this our world of the senses is a real one - in spite of all the flights of the mind or the insights of the mystics. Your *New Vision* is *secular* - which means not profane, but that it reckons with the *saeculum* as a reality not to be whisked away.

The second feature of your book is that it offers a clear synthesis of some of the major traditions of the world. You show how they converge, how they differ, while sprouting, as it were, both from the same subjective urge and the same objective feature of Reality. You hardly quote anybody, but the imprint of the masters of the so-called *philosophia perennis* is visible everywhere, and you prolong their intuition on two new lines: on the line of the contemporary scientific discoveries, and on the line of an evolutionary pattern. This allows you to unfold new insights into the nature of Reality and new interpretations of old wisdoms. You certainly do not fall into the temptation of a mere conservative position which is the danger of a certain new brand of *philosophia perennis*.

Your book is a fascinating example of how different religious traditions meet and engage each other in a fruitful dialogue. It is a point in case of what, decades ago, I did call "Ecumenical Ecumenism". You avoid the double pitfall of solipsism on the one hand and eclecticism on the other.

In our times of fragmented specializations on the one side and shallow generalizations on the other, your book is going to provide a valuable help to the average reader who is often immersed in a technocratic world with little access to an integrated spirituality. Your *New Vision* is *synthetic* - which means not eclectic, but that it offers a unifying pattern to view Reality.

The third aspect I would like to underline is what you call *The New Age*. The use of labels is hazardous because they symbolize more than what they signal. The ambivalence of the phrase "new age" is rich in consequences. On the one hand, you unambiguously declare, since the first line of the book, that we are at the end of an age, and that we are on the verge of a new culture. On the other hand, you use an expression which has particular connotations, mainly in the West, since at least the sixties and which is connected with a particular reaction against the established order. By doing so you bring together two currents of thought: one, which is more academic, begun since the turn of the century, and speaks of *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* (1918), and another, which stresses, on a more existential way, that the predominant world-view today is running out of fuel (literally also). One of the dramas of history is that people of diverse groups (rich and poor, male and female, easterners and westerners, scientists and philosophers, young and elderly, leftists and rightists, believers and 'unbelievers', hierarchies and laities, ...) do not sufficiently dialogue, nor feel the need to do it. By the very title of your last chapter you give a twist to the double interpretation of the phrase. You discreetly remind the academics that the New Age is not a mere theoretical issue, and the activists that it is not a question of merely changing dress, or even religion. The changes are not only sociological, they are metaphysical. And this is the challenge. Your *New Vision* is *new* - which means not original, but that you put together many of the broken pieces of our fragmented prevalent culture.

Having said so much, let me now show my appreciation by a sort of post-face to your writing. It is meant only to deepen and continue the dialogue, besides being the testimony of taking seriously your *New Vision*.

Respected Acarya

I would like to include the following comments to invite the reader to delve deeper into the problematic of your Vision. The devil's advocate is even necessary to canonize a saint! I shall limit my remarks also to three points.

The first point is *methodological*.

Here is not the place to put forward my hypothesis that the present day world crisis stems from a crisis of kosmologies (*sic*). By kosmology, I understand not only a world-view (cosmology), but how the world (reality) appears, or reveals to us. Each kosmology is not only a world-view, it is a different world. We should avoid the modern mistake of believing that 'our' world is the truly real one (the astronomic picture of the universe, for instance) and that the other worlds are only different world-views - of our world, of course.

I introduce this paragraph in order to stress your own point that the notion of reality with which Contemporary Science operates is the realm of the quantifiable, the appearance, and the rational, whereas the reality which many traditions deal with belong to the non-quantifiable, the non-apparent, and the non-rational - which, of course, nobody should confuse with the irrational.

The Bing Bang, to put an example, does not refer to the real world as understood by most human traditions. It is just a picture, and a simple one for that matter. Or again, the web of relationships found in contemporary Physics may give us a useful metaphor for the *pratītya-samutpāda*, the radical relativity, of buddhism or the Mystical Body of christianity, but these latter insights do not refer to the 'same' (scientific) reality, nor the one proves the other. Most of the different layers of the real, you so clearly describe, are not touched by the scientific method. Contemporary Science offers a good metaphor, but not the paradigm. Or, to put it differently, Comparative Kosmology needs another methodic than the methodology we use when comparing similar or different ideas. You are careful enough not to commit that mistake, but the reader may too easily deem that Science offers the 'proof' for traditional wisdoms. Neither they speak the same language - in spite of similar idioms (most of the times accommodated translations) -, nor they talk about the same reality. And yet, your valuable insights may lead us to a fruitful clarification of fields and contexts.

A similar critique could be expressed regarding a certain 'fulfilment theology' underlying some of your expressions. It seems as if all were culminating in a christian-scientific view of Reality, although you clearly reject such an interpretation in other statements. The fact that you follow a christian vision does not entail that another vision may not emerge with another set of presuppositions. It is significant to

observe that you can ally yourself with the modern scientific worldview. There is certainly a strong link between the judeo-christian tradition and Modern Science. Yet, none of them are either neutral or universal.

The second point is *philosophical*.

What I find fascinating in your essay is the daring combination of a *philosophia perennis* type of vision with a Teilhardian evolutionary scheme. The question is how far these two ingredients of your thought are compatible. Or is this a break-through?

I find incompatibility on two accounts.

First, on account of doctrines; second, on account of ways of thinking.

First, the *philosophia perennis* or the primordial tradition as others would like to call it, asserts that there is an unchangeable metaphysical core underlying all (or most) human traditions. You describe this core several times, and this allows you to draw your "Unifying Plan". But the law of evolution, as you describe it implies "that at every stage, when a lower level of being is transcended, it is integrated in the higher level". Why then Comte or Feuerbach, or many others may not be right in applying the same principle to the findings of the *philosophia perennis* allegedly transcended by atheism, philosophical materialism, humanism or any other theory accepting the evolution of our consciousness?

The *philosophia perennis* would then be just a passing moment in the evolution of Reality and we are left without any criterion to judge except with what *de facto* has superseded the old. The Omega point could then be viewed as the overcoming of all religions, mysticisms and spiritualisms once our modern science has shown the epistemological mistakes, psychological tricks and sociological pulsations (for power) inherent in all religious traditions. A sophisticated scientific philosopher could persuasively try to show that on the higher scientific level, positive science has integrated all the urge of the lower religious and metaphysical levels. This could defeat your purpose.

The second account lies precisely on the very way of thinking. The theory of evolution is more than a darwinistic theory of the species

or a neo-darwinistic ideology. It is a way of thinking which claims to reach intelligibility by discovering the 'evolution' of a process. You say that "the rational consciousness by which we observe the universe and develop our physics is itself only one stage in the evolution of consciousness". This may be the case, but the evolution of consciousness is not only an evolution of our awareness, it is an evolution of the universe itself because consciousness is also part of Reality. Now, consciousness in the *philosophia perennis* is not a psychological state nor even an epistemological feature, but it has an ontological consistency, so much so that in some traditional systems it is the very 'stuff' of the universe. They can say this because the traditional way of thinking is not an evolutionary one. Becoming is synonymous to evolution only when we think in a linear temporal pattern, which is not the traditional way of thinking, not even in the judeo-christian first sixteen centuries. The Māṇḍūkya Upanishad you quote does not speak of four evolutionary stages, nor of four psychological levels, but of four dimensions of reality. It is altogether another mentality.

I am not saying who is right or wrong. I am only detecting a profound incompatibility. Perhaps out of this impasse a new light may come, but to juxtapose the two conceptions of reality may not be enough. I well understand that you put a God outside this cosmic evolution. But this may satisfy neither the evolutionist nor the metaphysician. I only signal the difficulties as a humble *pūrvapakshin*, the devil's advocate I mentioned in the beginning.

The third point is *theological*.

Your main concern is christian and you affirm "that with the coming of Christ the final fulfilment of this experience of ultimate Reality was reached". Since at least two decades, I am asking not for a Third Vatican Council (or Chicago I, for the progressists), but for a Second Council of Jerusalem (for the third millennium of Christian history). It would obviously not be a Council of christians alone in the juridical sense of the word, but a universal gathering of all living beings.

In a buddhist context I call for a Rājgīri II. At Rājagṛha was celebrated the First Buddhist Council immediately after the Buddha's *mahāparanirvāṇa*, similarly as the Jerusalem I was convened after Jesus' resurrection.

The burning issues of the world today require the participation of the entire human race, and even the symbolic (which does not mean unreal) participation of all spheres of reality. The problems of the world today cannot be seen, let alone solved, from one single perspective, tradition, or even vision. Only a council can bring about re-conciliation.

This is not the place to develop further this thought. I would like only to share with you (and your readers) three christian questions I have for the agenda of the Council and which are related to the christian contents of your book. Part of your subtitle is "Christian Faith." The overall problem is how faith today relates to what is sociologically called christianity.

My three questions are implicit in your pages. It might be useful to spell them out. The reader will thus grasp the far-reaching problematic you are presenting. I shall spell out the three interrogations only.

You use, without questioning its validity, the modern expression "New Testament." I say "modern," because until the end of the Middle Ages this phrase was hardly used. The Bible, the so-called Old Testament was the Hebrew Bible. Christian Scriptures were called the Gospels and the Apostolic Letters. The question is this: How far is it necessary to consider Baptism as a qualified substitution for Circumcision? Is that the meaning of the break introduced by the First Council of Jerusalem? St. Paul said that the *Torah* was no longer valid. Have not Christians made another Covenant? Does it belong to the essence of "Christian Faith"? Do we really need a New Testament? Are christians simply competing with jews by swearing by a "New Covenant"?

Besides the theological aspect there is also a philosophical problem. Covenant is meaningful only within a certain historical conception of Reality. It has little meaning, and even intelligibility, in most of the asian traditions. Have all those peoples to be circumcised in their minds if they have to accept the message of Christ?

The second question is still more basic. Bluntly put: Is the *Abba* of Jesus Christ the Yahweh of the Hebrew Bible? Is the idea of a God as the Supreme Being a non-negotiable tenet for the christians of the

third millennium? The question is so important that the less I expand on it the better. The reader will understand that the question is implicit in your *Vision*.

The third question would like to ask whether you see a passage from christianity to christianness analogous to the passage from christendom to christianity. *Christendom* is all-embracing. It is a theo-political notion, a civilization, an ideology - in the best sense of those words. *Christianity* is doctrinal, a culture, a religion.

Christianness is experiential, a spirit, a spirituality. The three moments are probably inseparable and their relationship may be *advaitic*, but the emphasis shifts from the one to the other. Is this an implication of your *New Vision of Reality*?

In sum, can we have a Vision of reality if we are part of the Reality itself? A Vision of Reality belongs already to reality. We touch the ineffable, the invisible, the non-vision, *śūnyatā*, emptiness, *wu-wei*, the mystical dimension of which your book gives an insight.

I should not close this letter without mentioning the *Sitz im Leben* of this book. It is the ashram of the Holy Trinity, it is a place on the banks of the holy Kavery in South India, it is a space for contemplation, retreat, simplicity, it is a gentle invitation to a new christian life from which, from the depths of a heart at peace, the Acārya consents to share with us *A New Vision of Reality*.

With *praṇāma* and love,

Raimundo Panikkar
Kodaikkanal
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