

# LANGUAGE AND TRUTH IN GOD-TALK VIS- À-VIS GOD-EXPERIENCE

Jose Nandhikkara<sup>♦</sup>

## 1. Introduction

This is a review article on *The Experience of God: Icons of the Mystery*, written by Raimon Panikkar and translated by Joseph Cunneen from *L'Experience de dieu: Icons du mistere*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006. The book, according to Panikkar himself, grew out of a week of conferences he gave to theology professors at the Benedictine monastery of Silos. I take this well written book as “something for a philosophical treatment,”<sup>1</sup> after Wittgenstein, as it inspired me to thoughts of my own. We experience more than we can speak about and we speak about more than we could systematise. Experience and language, belief and practice, though distinct, are inseparable. They get their significance and meaning only in the stream of life. It is not the question of what they are in themselves, but what lies around them, the hurly-burly of our ordinary life that gives them their value in our lives. God-experience and God-talk, though unique, are also interwoven in the stream of life giving ultimate meaning and purpose for our being human. Panikkar sees the fundamental relations between God, human and world and presents a cosmotheandric vision of reality in this work. It is a religious view of life, showing the universality and fundamental nature of the religious dimension of human life. Reality, according to Panikkar, is non-dual and Trinitarian. God, human, and world are neither one nor two nor three; they form a unity in diversity. In his meditations, he mediates between the Trinitarian view of God and the advaitic view of reality.

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<sup>♦</sup>**Dr. Jose Nandhikkara** CMI, a specialist in Linguistic Philosophy, especially Wittgenstein, holds MA in Philosophy and Theology from Oxford University, Licentiate in Philosophy from Gregorian University, Rome, and Ph.D. from Warwick University, UK. He lectures on Philosophical Anthropology, Medieval Philosophy, and Contemporary Western Philosophy at Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram, Bangalore. He is also the director of the Centre for the Study of World Religions, DVK, Bangalore.

<sup>1</sup>Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1953, 254.

## 2. Speaking of God

The first chapter, 'Speaking of God', elaborates nine propositions that show that our God-talk is not a discourse about an object, but about the meaning of life. It (1) requires a preliminary interior silence, (2) has its own style, (3) includes our whole being, (4) regards God alone, (5) needs the mediation of a belief, (6) regards symbol and not concept, (7) includes several meanings, (8) does not exhaust the divine, and (9) leads back to a new silence. Placing himself in the apophatic tradition, Panikkar says: "To pretend to limit, define, or comprehend God is in itself a contradictory effort, since its achievement would be a creation of the mind, a creature" (18). The experience of God is ineffable and no one can describe it adequately. Panikkar reiterates the classical Christian distinction between *credere in Deum* "to believe in God" (opening to the mystery), *credere Deo* "to believe God" (to have confidence in what a Supreme Being has said), and *credere Deum* "to believe that God is" (to believe in God's existence) (30).

Panikkar is well aware of the fact that, in our God-talk, the very word 'God' is problematic, though he consoles himself that we cannot avoid employing one word or another. God is not an object; God is not a being, nor even the Supreme Being. That does not mean God does not exist. It just means that 'God' does not mean something in the way that a name refers to an object. The name and object formula is neither sufficient nor necessary for referring to the reality of God. In fact, the search for an object that stands for 'God' is the result of ignorance regarding both the reality of God and the use of the word 'God' in religious forms of life. It is the deep-seated philosophical prejudice that bewitches us to treat all words as names referring to objects. There are numerous ways of understanding the word God, and no one use has a monopoly on its meaning. God-talk is part of human language use and forms a kind of unity from a varied and interconnected complex network of different languages. All are not of equal value, but they overlap and crisscross, witnessing and contributing to the richness of religious experience, shedding light both on the mystery of God, human being, and the world. It is to be reminded that we do not use a special language in our God-talk. What I learn from Panikkar and Wittgenstein is that one has to take the experience of God as something fundamental and resist temptations to explain it or to reduce it to something else for which a philosophical or scientific point of view is capable of providing an answer. The experience of God is something fundamental for believers not because of any epistemic or

phenomenological property, but by virtue of the place it occupies in their lives.

The experience of God is not the experience of an object. There is no object God of which we can have the experience. God-experiences are, by nature, not available for empirical verification. That does not mean that they are not real. As in other matters of philosophy, though hard to achieve, realism but not empiricism<sup>2</sup> is the noble goal in our God-talk. One is reminded of Wittgenstein’s injunction in the *Tractatus*: “What can be said at all be said clearly, and what we cannot talk about we must pass over in silence.”<sup>3</sup> In fact, Panikkar concludes his meditations pointing to silence as a privileged ‘place’ to meet God. He quotes from *Brihadaranyka Upanishad*: “Let the wise man practise wisdom and not launch into long speeches that are mere empty words” (IV.4.21). What, then, is the justification for Panikkar to launch into long speeches rather than practise silence?

Panikkar seems to be following Augustine’s injunction: “*Et vae tacentibus de te quoniam loquaces muti sunt.*”<sup>4</sup> The attitude of later Wittgenstein was also similar: “don’t for heaven’s sake, be afraid of talking nonsense! Only don’t fail to pay attention to your nonsense.”<sup>5</sup> In Wittgenstein’s terms, we use pictures in our God-talk. To contemplate God and to speak about God, we use *our* pictures, pictures from a human point of view. Wittgenstein observed: “... even the hugest telescope has to have an eye-piece no larger than the human eye.”<sup>6</sup> These pictures are from our lives in the world and they are seen from a religious point of view so that they correspond to the experience of God. These pictures depend upon human perspectives. However, “The picture has to be used in an entirely different way,”<sup>7</sup> in a religious way. Panikkar seems to be closer to this tradition in presenting the meditations on the icons of the mystery, with

<sup>2</sup>Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, eds. G. H. von Wright, R. Rhees, and G. E. M. Anscombe, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978, 325.

<sup>3</sup>Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. C. K. Ogden, London: Routledge, 1922, 7.

<sup>4</sup>Augustine, *Confessions* 1.4. Woe to those who say nothing concerning thee just because the chatterboxes talk a lot of nonsense.

<sup>5</sup>Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, ed. G. H. von Wright, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1998, 64.

<sup>6</sup>Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 17.

<sup>7</sup>Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, ed. C. Barrett, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1966, 63.

love and care. Icons are symbolic and imaginative representations and not sensible reproductions. They are pictures used by believers in religious ways, with faith and love. Panikkar speaks from his heart, from his deep personal experiences, more like a sage and a prophet. This is a challenging and stimulating work inviting the readers to deeper levels of a universal and unique experience: The Experience of God.

### 3. The Experience of God

The second chapter, titled ‘The Experience of God’, begins with a sketch of “silence of life,” described as the “art of making silent the activities of life that are not life itself in order to reach the pure experience of life” (24). Life is not to be equated with the activities of life. According to Panikkar, the experience of God includes four distinct but inseparable moments: The pure experience, the memory of that moment, our interpretation of it in our language, and its reception in the cultural world. Experience (E) is, then, a combination of personal experience (e), conveyed by our memory (m), modelled by our imagination (i), and conditioned by its reception (r) in the cultural context of our time, i.e.,  $E=e.m.i.r$ . Each culture offers us the environment of intelligibility in which things and events take on meaning. God-experience also takes place in a cultural environment. It is religion that gives the ultimate content to culture so much so that Panikkar affirms: “there is no religion without culture and no culture without religion” (27). Wittgenstein draws a sketch on how a child is initiated into a culture and beliefs: “The child learns to believe a host of things. I.e., it learns to act according to these beliefs. Bit by bit there forms a system of what is believed, and in that system some things stand unshakeably fast and some are more or less liable to shift. What stands fast does so, not because it is intrinsically obvious or convincing; it is rather held fast by what lies around it.”<sup>8</sup> Belief in God, experience of God and speaking of God also are learned by a believer, bit by bit as a result of nurture and culture.

Religion is a constitutive dimension of being human and the experience of God nourishes men and women. Human beings are fully human only from the moment that they experience their ultimate foundation, what they really are. Inasmuch as it is ultimate experience, the experience of God is one that is not only possible but even necessary for all human beings to arrive at the awareness of their own identity. It is the

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<sup>8</sup>Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, eds. G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1969, 144.

*intimor intimo meo*, to speak as Saint Augustine, “the most intimate aspect of myself,” what is most interior to me, what I most truly am, and what then, precisely, opens me to others (45). The function of divinity, according to Panikkar, is to confer an ultimate frame of reference. “Divinity is the plenitude of the human heart, the real destiny of humanity, the guide of all peoples, the beloved of mystics, the lord of history, the complete realization of what we really are” (35). The ultimate questions regarding meaning and purpose of life are related to belief in God: “To believe in a God means to understand the question about the meaning of life. To believe in a God means to see that the facts of the world are not the end of the matter. To believe in God means to see that life has a meaning.”<sup>9</sup> Belief in God is not primarily a cognitive act, a matter for our reason but a form of life. Though the experience of God generally occurs through the mediation of a belief, they are not identical. God-experience, religious beliefs and practices are interwoven in the stream of life and it is the life of the believer that gives significance and meaning to them and they, in turn, give meaning and purpose to human life.

We are able to situate divinity beyond the universe or in its own centre, in the depths of the human (our intellect or our heart), or, quite simply, nowhere. Panikkar proposes a cosmotheandric vision of reality that does not divide reality into matter and spirit. His vision is unique as he does not sacrifice the matter on the altar of the spirit (idealistic spiritualities of all kinds), nor the spirit on the altar of the matter (empiricist materialisms of all kinds). In this advaitic vision, the word is alive in the world of the spirit, thought influences matter, the senses are spiritual, the divine is incarnated, and the human is impregnated with divinity (48). The experience of God, according to Panikkar’s cosmotheandric vision, is the root of all experience. It is the source, centre and limit of all human experiences and of each of them. In our day-to-day experiences such as eating, drinking, sleeping, loving, working, etc., we discover the experience of God. The world of a mystic is categorically different from that of others; it is not an empirical difference but in the way the mystic lives. The mystic constantly lives in the presence of God. God-experience is not just one of the experiences beside others; it is beneath every experience and makes us human. Through this experience, we come to recognize that we are in the interior of something that includes

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<sup>9</sup>Wittgenstein, *Notebooks 1914-1916*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1961, 74.

everything. The experience of God requires all our being and our whole being; it occurs in and with the totality of reality. We are not like fish in the water, but a water drop in the ocean of reality. God is not just the *intimor intimo meo* but I am *intimo Deo*.

A well-defined initiation is the normal path to the experience of God. We have a need of genuine masters – fathers, mothers, teachers, elders, priests, and mystics – who can initiate their fellow human beings into the experience of God. Initiation is personal and the experience of God is also personal. The way is unique for each pilgrim. Wittgenstein wrote perceptively:

... [I]nstructing in a religious belief would have to be portraying, describing that system of reference & at the same time appealing to the conscience. And these together would have to result finally in the one under instruction himself, of his own accord, passionately taking up that system of reference. It would be as though someone were on the one hand to let me see my hopeless situation, on the other depict the rescue-anchor, until of my own accord, or at any rate not led by the hand by the instructor, I were to rush up & seize it.<sup>10</sup>

Neither do all people see the situation religiously nor do they rush up and seize the rescue-anchor, nor do they go to the same rescue-anchor. In answer to the question ‘Why do you find these significant?’ a believer typically narrates a personal story. Here giving examples and telling stories are not an indirect means of explaining – in default of a better. In the end, however, they can only reiterate their reaction and say that it is because they are significant. Initiation begins with the step from bios to zoe, from pure physical-chemical biology to humanly conscious life. It is then that human life, properly speaking, begins (53). We are human, that is a living being more than a species of animal, precisely through that initiation that renders us, in scholastic terms, *capax Dei*.

#### **4. Christian Experience of God**

In the third chapter, titled, “Christian Experience of God,” Panikkar boldly claims that many possible experiences of the divine mystery would have the right to call themselves Christian. The title of the chapter has no definite article because he does not claim to describe *the* Christian experience of God. It is puzzling, however, in the context of the title of the book, *The Experience of God*, which was also the title of the second

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<sup>10</sup>Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 73.

chapter of the book. How could Panikkar justify himself using the definite article for ‘Experience of God’ but not for the ‘Christian Experience of God’? He also does not add the indefinite article, “for it is not a question of *one* – and only *one* experience among all those that are possible” (61). Though there are a number of ways to have Christian Experience of God, they are to be connected with the faith in Jesus Christ. I agree with Panikkar that Christianity should not be reduced to a historical religion and a religion of the book, but it cannot live without those historical roots. Though the Gospels are not merely historical records, and the Christian faith transcends historical facts, the Gospels and other New Testament writings are normative for Christian faith and the Christian experience of God. Panikkar’s fascination for the universality of Christian experience of God waters down its uniqueness.

Panikkar, an *acharya* in interreligious dialogue, rightly affirms: “One of the most urgent tasks of the world today is the establishment of bridges between different religions” (28). The experience of God cannot be monopolized by any religion or any system of thought. Each religion should express its uniqueness in its complete integrity. “The Unknown Christ of Hinduism,”<sup>11</sup> Panikkar clarifies, was not the Christ known to the Christians and unknown by the Hindus. In his view, there are other aspects of the Christic mystery that Christians do not know, and that the Hindus know under another name. The formula of John, “Christ is the *alpha* and the *omega*,” implies that Christ is *alpha*, *beta*, *gamma*, *delta*, all the way to *omega*: he is all. This is, however, a confession of faith; and one who makes this faith is a Christian. Here, Christian faith transcends its juridical, doctrinal, and historical limits. It is to be emphasized, at the same time, that there cannot be a Christian faith without these and similar elements. These are boundaries and bonds. In our eagerness to find similarities, we shall not forget the differences among various ways of being Christian. I do not deny the fact that there are ways of belonging to Christ without belonging to the visible body of Christ. It is presumptuous and misleading from the part of Christians, however, to speak of “The Unknown Christ” of any other religious tradition. Though Panikkar admits that “In its own manner, each religion can profess a similar project, using their symbols and their denominations” (74), it will generate only a confusion of tongues

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<sup>11</sup>Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism: Towards an Ecumenical Christophany*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1981.

(*Sprachverwirrung*), rather than a meaningful language-game (*Sprachspiel*). Dialogue partners are accepted and celebrated as they are and not in some 'foreign' terms. Cross fertilization and mutual fecundation do not necessarily bring forth healthy offspring. Panikkar's claim to be Christian, Hindu, and Buddhist, at the same time, is flawed. Christian experience of God is unique and universal. It is open to all cultures and traditions and takes different forms in expressions in different places and times.

As Panikkar observes, "This kind of 'ecumenical ecumenism' does not mean that each religion should resign itself to eat only one part of the great desert at the wedding of heaven and earth, and that every one should feel satisfied in his or her egoism. Ecumenism does not surrender the *totum*, the plenitude that each religion concretely promises, but is aware that one savours the *totum in parte*, the whole in one's particular part" (74-75). This shows that we should speak of 'the Christian Experience', accepting and celebrating each experience as singularly unique, neither superior nor inferior to any other. Each one is personal and particular, but with roots in the historical, juridical, doctrinal, and universal dimensions of the Christian Experience of God. The Christian Experience of God is unique and universal.

Christ is the parameter for Christian God-talk. Panikkar, however, urges us not to confuse Jesus with the Christ. Jesus is Christ, and he who confesses that Jesus is Christ obviously is a Christian (69). It is in and through Christ that Christians find themselves in harmony with all things, with all beings, and with all other men and women. It is Christ the only Son, the Firstborn, Head, Alpha and Omega, Logos from the beginning, through whom everything has been made and who bears everything, as the Christian scriptures declare. But this Christ is not identical with Jesus (69), Panikkar wants to clarify. For example, in the Eucharist, there is the presence of real Christ, but in the Eucharist there are not the proteins of Jesus, son of Mary. Communion is not cannibalism. The identification of Jesus of Nazareth, which permits us not to confuse him with anyone else, is not the same as his identity, the identity that would allow us to know him. To know a person's identity, one needs love and faith. To know the identity of Jesus of Nazareth, we must meet his person. If Christ is no more than an historic personage, the experience of the Christian is reduced to living the memory of his life, retransmitted by the memory that people have preserved of it. In that case, it is the experts who would have the greatest authority, and Christianity is thereby reduced to being a religion of



the Book (70-71). However, as it was pointed out earlier, though distinct, we cannot separate historical Jesus and the Christ of Christian faith. The Christian experience of God is the experience of the risen Jesus, that is, living, *hic et nun* (here and now), yesterday, today, and always, to use the words of St. Paul.

The mystery of Incarnation cannot be separated from the mystery of Resurrection and both are fundamental to the Christian experience of God. Panikkar seems to be fascinated and held by the pole of Christ of faith without paying sufficient attention to the historical pole of Christian faith. In his legitimate desire and passionate commitment to dialogue among religions, he looks for dehellenization and dehebraization. Though he admits that we cannot throw two thousand years of Hellenistic influence and three thousand years of Hebraic tradition overboard, he feels that the Jewish conception of history has limited the Christian God to being the Lord of History while the ontological notion of Hellenism has reduced God to being the Lord of Being (76). Rather than a total deconstruction that may also lead to a total destruction of Christian faith, we should look closer and clarify the elements and see their constitutive and consequent dimensions.

The Christian experience of God is trinitarian, not monistic or dualistic. God is neither one nor three. If there is one and only one God, the Trinity is either superfluous or no more than a simple modality. If there are three gods, the Trinity is an aberration (64). Father, Son, and Spirit are three persons constituting a unity without confusion and mixing. As St. Augustine remarked, when we begin to count, however, we are into error (*Qui incipit numerare incipit errare*). In Panikkar's cosmotheandric vision of reality, God, the Human, and the World are neither one, nor two, nor three. They are not three things, neither are they one. There is a fundamental relationship, an irreducible connection between these realities. According to Panikkar, “only through the constant negation of duality, by the refusal to close the process, in the conscious renunciation of trying to understand everything, in the *neti neti* of apophatic mysticism, that we can approach the trinitarian mystery” (64). For him, reality is trinitarian, not dualist, neither one nor two: the Source of what is, that which Is, and its very Dynamis; Father, Son, and Spirit; *Sat*, *Cit* and *Ananda*; the Divine, the Human and the Cosmic. Only by denying duality, without reducing everything to unity, are we able consciously to approach it.

Panikkar presents a cosmotheandric and advaitic interpretation of the Christian God through three texts: “It is in him that we have life, and move, and exist” (Acts 17:28), “No one has seen God” (John 1:18), and “So that God may be all in all” (1 Cor. 15:28). God-Human-World is non-dual; they are distinct but inseparable. One should also understand and make it one’s own the experience of Jesus expressed in the following three texts: “The Father and I are one” (John 10:30), “Who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9), and “It is better for you that I go away, because if I do not go away, the Spirit will not come” (John 16:7). Panikkar interprets these texts showing the fundamental relationship between Father, Son, and the Spirit and the uniqueness and universality of the Christian experience of God (76-86). These are meditations, inspired readings and *lectio divino*, rather than biblical exegesis, inspiring and challenging the reader to delve deep into the mystery of Reality.

### **5. Privileged Places of ‘The Experience of God’**

The final and fourth chapter speaks of nine “Privileged Places of The Experience of God.” God is everywhere, immense, yet does not have parts: God is simple. This means we can meet God completely in any place, whatever form, and we can encounter God anywhere. We have only to seek God and hold ourselves ready for the encounter (89). He gives the example of a fish. The fish has a certain awareness of things but does not perceive that it is surrounded by water. Just so, we do not perceive God if we do not go beyond our purely empirical consciousness. The first generations of Christians criticized “the pagans” because they personified the forces of nature by divinizing them. Recent post-Christian generations reproach Christians for having an anthropological vision of God. God is not reducible either to a ‘super-*kosmos*’ or to a ‘super-*anthropos*’. He is the root of the *cosmotheandric* intuition. We can meet God everywhere but not in just any way. Purity of heart is the condition for the experience of God: “Blessed are the pure of heart for they will see God” (Mt. 5:8).

Among the innumerable places where God is to be found, Panikkar identifies nine: “Love, The Thou, Joy, Suffering, Evil, Pardon, Crucial Moments, Nature and Silence.” There seems to be unanimity that the most privileged place for the meeting of humans and God is the experience of love. It is in human love itself that Divinity resides. The experience of God is the experience of thou, which leads us to the impossibility of the experience of I alone, precisely because I am not able to experience myself without being “objectivized” in a thou. Joy, suffering, evil, and pardon

also give occasions for the experience of God. Any moment can be a privileged place to encounter God. According to Panikkar, the readiness to be surprised and to wonder is almost a requirement for experiencing God. It is not that the mysterious, the ineffable, the incomprehensible, is in itself identical to the experience of God, but that it is a privileged locus of that experience. It is written that God is a hidden being, whose tabernacle is found in the shadows and whose recreation consists in chatting with people, even about cooking and sex (126). Nature is also a privileged place for the experience of God. The absence of an advaita experience has led Christianity, according to Panikkar, to allow itself to be invaded by a panic fear of a so-called pantheism. To avoid monism, Christians fall into dualism. God and the world are radically separated, which means that the transcendent God becomes progressively more superfluous, relegated to a heaven that is not even the heaven of the astronomers. While nature as the temple of God is a well-known image, it usually is interpreted in a way that keeps divine transcendence intact, at the price of forgetting God's immanence. Nature is not only a privileged but also a natural place for meeting God. Silence, Panikkar concludes, is the medium of God-talk and God-experience. He quotes Angelus Silesius, *The Cherubic Pilgrim*:

God is so far beyond everything that we can scarcely speak,  
 Thus it is also by means of your silence that you adore him.  
 Remain silent, beloved, silent...  
 If you wish to express the being of eternity,  
 You first must abandon all discourse.  
 When you remember God, you hear him in yourself.  
 You become quiet and if you remain silent and peaceful,  
 He will not stop speaking to you.  
 No one speaks less than God, without time or place...  
 The more that you know God, the more you shall confess  
 That you are able to know less of what he is (130).

Knowing how to listen is the gate to God-experience and silence is the medium of God-talk.

## 6. Conclusion

To conclude, the experience of God is understood, by Panikkar, as subjective genitive – God's experience. It is not my experience of God but God's experience in me and through me of which I am conscious. It is a participation of myself in the experience of God. It implies my conscious

response and my participation in that experience whose ultimate subject is God. I understand my participation in that experience as a communion, a communion between God, who is the subject, and that experience of God that is mine to the degree that I become conscious of it (58). God is not an object of experience. It is the experience of God that occurs within me, in which I participate more or less consciously. Our experience of God is the divine self-consciousness in which we participate as we become, in Christian language, part of the “whole Christ” – the *Christus totus*.

The experience of God is the experience of the religious dimension of reality, transcending reason and passion, which shows its effect fundamentally in the way we live, move, and have our being. It is the life that gives meaning and significance to our God-experience and God-talk. Experience of reality has three constitutive dimensions: World, Human, and God. It is at once the experience of the thing, of ourselves at the interior of the thing, and of God that embraces both. It is the experience of the cosmotheandric icon of reality at the particular place and time, from my personal perspective in the stream of my life. It is rooted in nature, extended to community and oriented to God. The experience of God is, therefore, experience of my profound Self, the paradoxical experience that we are most intimately our own and at the same time superior to ourselves. The necessary condition is to have a pure heart. The experience of God, thus, consists in touching the totality of Being with the totality of my being: to feel in my body, my intellect, and my spirit the whole of reality both within and outside of me. Paradoxically, it is also the experience of contingency: I merely touch the infinite at a point. The experience of God is unique and universal and it is the experience of the Mystery that governs our lives from both within and without. From a Christian point of view, God is with us, not as one more person or object in the world, but as the framework of our gatherings and the bedrock of our streams of life.