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THE DIATOPICAL HERMENEUTICS: R. PANIKKAR'S RESPONSE TO THE SCIENTIFIC STUDY OF RELIGIONS

Raimon Panikkar is one of today's leading scholars of Comparative Philosophy and Religious Studies. Attention will be focussed in this paper to spell out his response to the contemporary scientific study of religions. This response, to be sure, is marked by his Diatopical Hermeneutics with the Dialogical Dialogue as the proper method.

1. The Need for a Different Methodology

In our times we increasingly realize that in order to understand the various cultures and religions of the world, which are themselves different ways in which man tries to understand his being in the world and construct a coherent picture of reality, it is not enough that we examine objects "out there" according to our point of view, but we must also somehow incorporate these objects as subjects of understanding. In this sense, Panikkar thinks that to follow the paradigm of the scientific method of the "natural sciences" in order to progress in the field of religions is to adopt an improper methodological posture from the outset.

This implies that to understand the other as "other" is not to understand him as he understands himself, because the other does not understand himself as "other" but as "self". Now, how can we understand the other as the other understands himself if we do not have the self-understanding that he has? This takes us directly to the problem of hermeneutics.

2. The Diatopical Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics is a fashionable word now a days which is commonly understood as "the theory of the operations of the under-

standing in their relation to the interpretation of texts."¹ It takes on a different meaning in Panikkar's approach which attempts to study and integrate the wisdoms of various cultures and traditions which are "spatially" (*topoi*) far apart and hence have no common cultural source. He calls it hence the Diatopical Hermeneutics.²

This hermeneutics reminds us, among other things, that there are many different families of human cultures and, despite all their similarities, we cannot assume *a priori* that they are all governed by the same code. In other words, it considers the other-it could be culture, tradition, or text-equally an original source of understanding. Without elaborating further, let us now attempt at highlighting only a few salient aspects of Panikkar's cross-cultural hermeneutics.

a. *The Insufficiency of Dialectical Method*

Pointing out the insufficiency of dialectical method in cross-cultural interpretation, Panikkar thinks that dialectics is one particular way in which man seeks intelligibility. But he also submits that it is not the only one.³ Why?

Dialectics, for Panikkar, stands for the dignity of the human *logos* endowed with the power of discriminating between truth and error by means of reason. The governing principle here is the principle of non-contradiction: either/or. While this principle is essential in any interpretation, it cannot be fully applied in the cross-cultural interpretation of cultures and traditions, which are not dialectically structured. Moreover, a concept is valid only where

1. P. Ricoeur, "The Task of Hermeneutics", *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences. Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation*, ed. and tr. John B. Thompson (London: Cambridge University Press, 1985) P.43.

2. Panikkar suggests a new heremeneutics, which he calls the Diatopical Hermeneutics. He distinguishes it from the Morphological Hermeneutics which attempts at bridging a factual gap and from the Diachronical Hermeneutics which is the effort at closing a temporal gap. Cf. Panikkar, "Cross-cultural Studies", *Monchanin* 8 (June-December 1975) P.14.

3. Cf. Panikkar, "The Dialogical Dialogue", *The Word's Religious Traditions. Current perspectives in Religious Studies, Essays in Honour of Wilfred Cantwell Smith*, ed. Whaling F (Edinburg, 1984) PP.207-12.

it has been conceived.⁴ Hence the need for another method which would overcome-not deny-the rules of the dialectics.

b. *The Application of Homological Principle*

By the homological principle Panikkar understands "that 'golden rule' of common sense interpretation which holds that my interpretation must so characterize the interpreted thing that the interpreted thing is universally recognizable in my interpretation."⁵

In other words, the starting point of interpretation should be an area of common agreement. Only then the concepts in question can rightly be understood. Hence the need for searching out the homeomorphic equivalent. "Homeomorphism is not the same as analogy, it represents a functional equivalence discovered through a topological transformation."⁶ In cross-cultural interpretation what we need to avoid is the temptation to mutually translate a concept in one tradition with a corresponding one in another tradition, which might result in superficial parallelism, harmful synthesis and lifeless comparisons.

c. *The Complementarity of Dialogical Principle*

Panikkar considers the dialogical principle as a complementary to the homological principle which stands in need of an internal and external dialogue which would unearth the assumptions and of presuppositions of a given tradition. In this context Panikkar observes:

I find the name 'dialogical principle'
appropriate in as far as it is only through an

4. For example: to the question "Do you believe in God and or don't you?", the dialectical method allows no escape: either/or. But Panikkar poses this question: What if a particular culture does not put the question in this way? The question simply does not make sense when the God/no-God scheme is absent from a world-view. Cf. Panikkar, "Cross-cultural Studies," *op.cit.* p.15.

5. *Ibid.*

6. Panikkar, *Intrareligious Dialogue* (Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 1984) P. 31. The two words Brahman and God, for instance, are neither analogous nor merely equivocal. They are homeomorphic in the sense that each of them stands for something that performs an equivalent function within the respective system.

internal and external dialogue that one becomes aware of uncritical and unwarranted assumption which can no longer be held...We are beginning not to shun light and criticism which comes from other shores.⁷

In Panikkar's view-point, each of these principles, if applied alone, is unfruitful and inadequate. Hence his hermeneutics attempts to co-ordinate between these two principles, effecting thus a marriage, as it were, of *logos* and *mythos*. This co-ordinating activity, he calls, the 'Dialogical Dialogue' about which we shall reflect in the following section.

3. The Dialogical Dialogue

Dialogue for Panikkar, first of all, is that which happens between subjects who are, in other words, true sources of understanding. Precisely for this reason, the dialogue has to be dialogical (*dia-logos* : piercing through the *logos*-thus reaching the *mythos*). Since it involves meeting of persons-not objects or merely doctrines it's basis is the dynamic character of persons themselves. This dialogue involves a three-fold process : Dialogue with Oneself, Dialogue with the Other and Trust in Reality.

a. Dialogue with Oneself

Before we try to understand or dialogue with the other person or tradition, it is important that we gain an insight into our own tradition. Panikkar calls this 'the harmony from within'. If we gain this insight into our own tradition, we will be able to become aware of what he calls the *pars pro toto* effect.⁸ This implies

7. Panikkar, "Indology as a Cross-cultural Catalyst. A New Task of Indological Studies : Cross-cultural Fertilization", *Numen* 18 (December 1971) p.175.

8. Each tradition in its ultimate aspects claims or aspires to the *totum* (for instance, Christ is thus not an *avatara* among others or Siva just a god in the world-pantheon, but sees the *totum in parte* in one's own categories. Hence authentic tolerance does not require chopping off particular opinions. One does not need to dilute one's own religious commitments in order to accept those of the other. Cf. Panikkar, "The Invisible Harmony. A Universal Theory of Religion or a Cosmic Confidence in Reality?" *Toward a Universal Theology of Religions*, ed. Leonard Swidler, (New York Orbis Books, 1987.) pp.139-40.

that each one of us may be aware of the whole reality under one particular aspect, and this does not mean that we see only a part of reality or truth. Through our own religion or tradition we may see the whole truth, but under only one aspect, we see *all* that we *can* see.

The realization of this limitation in our very selves is very essential to open ourselves up to others. In this sense, for Panikkar, inter-religious dialogue has to be preceded by intra-religious dialogue. This dialogue 'within' or internal scrutiny changes not only our opinion about our own tradition (leading to a realization of our own limitation) but also makes us realize that we essentially need the other (person, tradition or whatever) even to understand our own.

b. *Dialogue with the Other*

Once the internal dialogue begins, once we are engaged in a genuine intra-religious scrutiny, we will be ready for what Panikkar calls the *imparative* method.⁹ This method is the effort at learning from the other and the attitude of allowing our own conviction to be fecundated by the insights of the other. It means to open ourselves from our stand point to a dialogical dialogue that does not seek to win or convince, but to search together from different vantage points.

In Panikkar's view, this mutual learning is indeed an open process. In this, we open ourselves to the other so that the partner may discover our myth, our underlying assumptions and criticize the foundation of our convictions, and vice-versa. This

9. Cf. Panikkar, "What is comparative Philosophy Comparing?" *Interpreting Across Boundaries. New Essays in Comparative philosophy*, eds. Gerald James Larson and Eliot Deutsch (Princeton University Press, 1988) pp. 122-8. Here, Panikkar argues that, strictly speaking, Comparative Philosophy or Religion is not possible, because we do not have any neutral platform outside every tradition where comparison may be drawn. We cannot compare (*comparare*-that is, to treat on an equal-par,-basis), for there is no *fulcrum* outside. He further argues that we can only *imparare* - that is, learn from the other by opening ourselves from our stand-point, to a dialogical dialogue that does not seek to win or to convince, but to search together from our different vantage points.

only means that we are not sufficient in constructing a complete picture of reality all by ourselves and that the other can and must offer a fundamental contribution in the common endeavour of grasping and shaping reality.

c. Trust in Reality

As the third-dimension of dialogue, Panikkar refers to a certain 'cosmic confidence' which he considers to be standing at the very basis of the dialogical dialogue and even makes it possible; This confidence consists in trusting reality as "cosmos", that is, the universe as having some sense (direction, rhythm, "meaningful" dynamism) and also in trusting each other in the ever better shaping of reality. It implies a firm confidence that there is more to reality than understanding, that reality is dynamic, rhythmic, ever-flowing and ever-becoming. Hence trust in reality basically consists in overcoming the provincialism which has made us believe that the world is merely full of life-less objects which we can simply manipulate and instrumentalize at our will for our own human selfish ends.

Panikkar's diatopical hermeneutics and dialogical dialogue, as sketched above, indeed instruct us that we cannot merely follow the paradigm of the scientific method of the "natural sciences" in order to progress in the field of religions. His contribution provides us with another radically different approach which overcomes—not deny—the rules of the dialectics which are commonly employed in the scientific study of religions.