Cosmic Confidence in Interreligious Spirituality

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COSMIC CONFIDENCE IN INTERRELIGIOUS SPIRITUALITY

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Abstract

This paper presents and examines the interreligious philosopher-theologian Raimon Panikkar’s proposal of ‘Cosmic Confidence’ in interreligious spirituality and another dialogue theologian Paul Knitter’s critique on it. Their conversation is to be situated in a wider issue of the relation between pluralism and justice. The paper proceeds in three parts. The first part summarily presents the context and direction of Panikkar’s pluralistic vision, particularly with a focus on his central insight of cosmic confidence. The second part indicates a challenge to Panikkar’s cosmic confidence in terms of a preferential option for the poor – a spirit, of course, of liberation theology, but also that gets reflected in the challenge thrown by Knitter. And the final part deals with some implications of their mutual dialogue for the issue of pluralism, justice and reconciliation.

Keywords: cosmic confidence, Panikkar, spirit, theology.

Introduction

Reflecting on the need for cosmic confidence, cross-culturally, the seminal contribution of the philosopher-theologian Raimon Panikkar comes immediately to our mind. Panikkar has been one of the greatest scholars of the 20th century in the areas of comparative philosophy/theology, cross-cultural philosophy of religion and interreligious dialogue and spirituality. Aptly styled, “the child of diverse cultures and the academic product of several disciplines,” “the finest fruit of the East-West fecundation process,” Panikkar, “one of the leading religious

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thinkers of our times,” “a mutational man in whom the thinking of the
new century has already begun,” and “a pioneer and an apostle of
interreligious dialogue,” had all through his life one overriding
concern: cross-cultural communication.

The real challenge to Panikkar, however, is the crucial question:
What is the response of his cross-cultural and interreligious vision to the
burning issue of justice, especially in a social context like in India? Stated
differently, in a wider frame work, the important issue for our analysis
is: what is the relation between pluralism and justice?

Let me begin the analysis with the words of Kenneth Surin: To
“proclaim peace amid diversity” when there is really “inequality and
oppression amid diversity” is to turn pluralism or dialogue into an
ideological weapon (Surin 1996, 184-5). Triggered indeed by this rather
poignant statement, I propose to make a small reflection on the
conversation that has taken place between two important dialogue
theologians of our times: Raimon Panikkar and Paul Knitter, focusing of
course on the issue of pluralism and justice.

In the first part, I summarily present the context and direction of
Panikkar’s pluralistic vision, particularly with a focus on his central
insight of Cosmic Confidence. In the second part, I shall indicate a
challenge to Panikkar’s cosmic confidence in terms of a preferential
option for the poor – a spirit, of course, of liberation theology, but also
that gets reflected in the challenge thrown by Knitter. And in the final
part, I shall show some implications of their mutual dialogue for the
issue of pluralism, justice and reconciliation.

I. Panikkar’s Pluralism

Clearly choosing pluralism over inclusivism, Panikkar appears to
be a “radical pluralist,” (Knitter 1996, 178) and this is explicitly evident
in his conviction, which he has repeated time and again, that in our

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2 Cf. Anthony Savari Raj, A New Hermeneutic of Reality. Raimon Panikkar’s Cosmotheandric
contemporary cross-cultural human situation, no single culture, no single religion, no single tradition, and no single person can even face – let alone solve – any of our human predicaments single handedly. We need a mutual fecundation, a cross-cultural sharing or even healing. The grounds for this pluralistic conviction of Panikkar, of course, are many and I now quickly indicate just two:

1. The first, a more immediate ground, is the prevalent context of Cultural Monomorphism.

Panikkar draws our attention to the western civilization’s thrust toward a monolithic unity and universalization since the Greeks up to our times (Panikkar 1995, 147-50), which he calls the “colonialistic cultural monomorphism” which attempts to bring everything into one fold, one form, one bag.

This monomorphizing tendency has taken many avatars or incarnations in history: one truth, one God, one religion, one church, one king, one empire, one science, one technology, one world economy, one World Bank, one democracy, one development, one superpower, and now one world market and one net-work of everything. “Truth is one, and I alone have it” is its basic presupposition. “Outside the church, no salvation” is another expression of the same mentality.

2. The second, and we may say, the ultimate ground for Panikkar’s pluralistic proposal, is the very trinitarian nature and structure of reality, which he calls as the Radical Trinity.\(^4\)

Panikkar works out an entire theology of religion in terms of an “advaitic trinitarianism,” where the advaita inspires the trinity towards unity, and the trinity in turn inspires the advaita towards diversity (Panikkar 2010, 212-32).

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3. This messianic syndrome of Christianity might have contributed to the colonial enterprises of western nations.

This “Advaitic Trinitarianism” is only a pointer to, or to be viewed in the backdrop of, the “Radical Trinity” – the universal trinitarian structure of reality, which, Panikkar believes to be an emerging religious consciousness of our times. What is more significant, however, is his extension of the Trinitarian understanding of God to the entire reality. The Trinity then is not merely a privilege of the Godhead or to do only with the life of God, but it has a lot to do with the very character of the entire reality.

Every reality that we encounter, therefore, is trinitarian, or to use Panikkar’s neologism: “cosmotheandric” – cosmic, divine and human. Just to state this trinitarian or cosmotheandric vision very simply:

There is no matter without spirit and no spirit without matter, no world without Man, no God without the universe, etc. God, Man and World are three artificially substantivized forms of the three primordial adjectives which describe Reality. (Panikkar 1978, 206)

This means that reality is cosmotheandric: cosmic, divine and human at the same time. These three dimensions of reality are the only three aspects of anything that is real. Distinctions could be and should be made between them, but no radical separation. We may say that there is a kind of dynamism of the three toward the one without ceasing to be different. This insight is also reflected in one of Panikkar’s inimitable statements:

I “left” [Europe] as a Christian, I “found” myself a Hindu and I “return” a Buddhist, without having ceased to be a Christian. (Panikkar 1978, 2)

The following mentions are just to indicate very quickly some implications of this Trinitarian vision of reality for religions and religious dialogue.

1. Panikkar’s vision seems to echo the *perichoresis* – an insight of the Greek theologians of the early centuries, which stands for a mutual indwelling of the trinity. The immediate implication here for religions is: *Each religion is only a dimension of the other. No religion can live in splendid isolation.*

2. The religious traditions of the world can dance in dialogue with each other and so grow in both difference and togetherness. *Harmony is not in spite of differences, but because of differences.*

3. Religions are invited and expected to perform the festivity of incompleteness by the dynamics of universalization and also overcome their blind spots in mutual criticism and dialogue. (A dip in a cosmotheandric solution might help a religious tradition develop its own picture of reality, which needs to be completed by the neighbor. After all, it’s only in *receiving*, that *conceiving* will take place).

4. Religions cannot focus any longer only on the element of God or Divine. If they do so, it becomes a one-sided endeavor. The authentic religious task would include the integration of all dimensions of reality – the cosmic, divine and human, including the reconnecting of the spirit to the body.⁶ In this regard, rather than restricting spirituality or mysticism to the realm of the spirit, otherworldly or the rare, it would link it to the experience of life which each of us enjoys – “a free and spontaneous attitude welling up from the person’s fullness.”⁷ Panikkar’s insight of *sacred secularity* and cosmotheandric spirituality may be helpfully recalled here. In this regard, the commonality of problems can offer a good starting point for religions to rally together.

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**The Role of Cosmic Confidence**

For Panikkar, it is not only *necessary* that the religious traditions exist and interrelate to one another, but it is really *possible* so. We may

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ask, in this connection, how does Panikkar know and assume this possibility of dialogue? There is where Panikkar’s “cosmic confidence” inserts itself as an answer.

Panikkar really does not know how religions could be radically different and diverse in their perspectives and orientations, and, at the same time, feel the need and have the ability to be connected to one another. Yet, he only trusts that his is so (Knitter 1996, 181). We find ourselves trusting that despite or because of our differences, we can and we must talk to, and learn from, and be changed by each other.

It is a trust that conversations between traditions are possible despite utter differences and that if we strive together in mutual trust, there is really a possibility of a mutual construction. In a word, it is a trust in the togetherness of reality and in our common endeavor in ever shaping it.

II. Cosmic Confidence or Preferential Option?

I now submit Panikkar’s cosmic confidence to a critique. As I have already mentioned, this critique comes from persons like Paul Knitter who prioritizes preferential option for the poor and oppressed, over cosmic confidence, thus indeed calling for “globally responsible, soteriocentric correlated dialogue of religions.”

II.1. The Need for a Critical Stand

Knitter surely acknowledges the validity of Panikkar’s warning and proposal that our conversation is possible only when there is a shared “cosmic trust” in the value of differences and the prospects of learning from and cooperating with each other.

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Yet he offers a critique that, by itself, Panikkar’s image of cosmic trust is still too general or too mystical and that “Panikkar is either encouraging or permitting a bourgeois mystical understanding of religious pluralism and dialogue” (Knitter 1996, 183). Therefore, he believes that Panikkar’s views tend to be only harmonizing and does not provide space for suffering and ruptures in human life – at least obviously. In other words, Panikkar is criticized for not taking seriously the power relations and their correct use within each religious tradition as between them.9

For Knitter – unless in our interreligious conversations we are able to confront and pass judgement on intolerable realities such as starvation, oppression of some human beings by others, torture, and economic injustice and wars that destroy both human and planetary life - the dialogue itself would become immoral.

Panikkar is therefore criticized as not to have sufficiently laid out the criteria – or the procedure – by which we can confront and oppose what seem to be the intolerables (Knitter 1996, 186).

To be sure, Panikkar, according to Knitter, does recognize the need for critical stances, but “he does not elaborate on how such stances are to be found”, or what are the “positive and concrete reasons” for determining “evil” or “intolerable” (185). In other words, a hermeneutic of confidence is not enough, what is needed is a hermeneutic of suspicion.

In a word, For Knitter, cosmic confidence, by itself, is insufficient in assisting one to enter in the difficult task of not only understanding but also of confronting and opposing each other.

II.2. The Kairos Confronting All Religions

Knitter further believes that the kairos confronting all religions is the necessity and opportunity to meet the priorities and needs of the poor of the world through dialogue and conversation. Such a preferential option

to respond to the human and ecological suffering that crisscrosses our cultures and religions would form the starting point, the basis, the heuristic for interreligious cooperation and conversation (186-8).

Hence he calls for a “soteriocentric” approach to dialogue and global responsibility, centering on the human and ecological suffering that confronts all of us. It is for this reason, that he suggests that Panikkar’s vision is grounded and inspired by a shared preferential option for the victims of this world. And he believes that this option for the suffering human of the suffering earth would give greater content and practicality to Panikkar’s vision, besides receiving a ground and a direction that would integrate its mystical content with concrete prophetic concern.

III. A Panikkarian Response: from Option to Attitude

I shall now discern a Panikkarian response to Paul Knitter’s critique.

III.1. Knitter’s Critique

In fact, there seems to be no contradiction between the preferential option as suggested by Knitter and Panikkar’s proposal of cosmic confidence. Indeed Panikkar’s insight of sacred secularity which evokes the togetherness of heaven and earth, temporality and eternity, would really offer an authentic base and inspiration to all our liberative commitments and programmes.

Panikkar’s vision would only include the Divine plus the cosmic in the “human” welfare, and would encourage an element of joy in all our enterprise. This critique may also indicate how Panikkar goes beyond Knitter in his enterprise and orientation.

III.2. Beyond Knitter

As I have already mentioned, Panikkar goes with Knitter as far as to recognize the intimate link between pluralism and justice and to
direct all our energies in the direction of socio-economic and political justice. But he is tempted to reinforce Knitter’s position of a preferential option for the oppressed by stressing “cosmic confidence” as the basis.

The concern for the poor presupposes precisely a cosmic confidence. In fact, why do we get so indignant at injustice, premature deaths, and sufferings if not because we assume a cosmic confidence in reality, in which somehow we trust and believe that life cannot be so senseless, unjust and cruel as to justify such manmade oppressions? It is that cosmic confidence which triggers the healthy decision of the “option.” It is the awareness of injustice, which leads to the “option.” It is the awareness of injustice which leads to the “option.” But this injustice is only detected because of our presupposition that there is a comic order which the injustice has precisely violated. (186-8)

To be sure, cosmic confidence and option for the poor do not belong to the same universe of discourse. It looks therefore, both Panikkar and Knitter share the same pathos, the former is an ultimate attitude, the latter a moral option – though both required; only their logos seems to be somewhat different (282). Panikkar shows the direction of Knitter’s logos through some critiques. I just indicate two: one anthropological, the other cross-cultural.

III.2.A. The Anthropological Comment

Through this comment Panikkar tries to show how attitude is deeper than option. Authentic actions spontaneously flow from a deeper attitude than a conscious option made in favour of the needy.

I wonder if Christ made an option to die on the Cross, if Francis of Assisi made an option to embrace poverty, if Luther made an option (“Here I stand and I can’t do otherwise!”), or even if a loving mother makes an option to kiss her child or to spend a sleepless night beside her ailing baby, or an artist paints a canvas, an author writes a poem or a composer creates music out of clear options of love, service, beauty or whatever. It is something stronger than options, more powerful than decisions. (282-3)

He states further:
I feel I have no option but to strive for justice. I have no option but to stand at the side of the oppressed. We have no option but to speak the truth. I have no alternative other than to set my life at stake for the sake of peace. My conscience has no other option. (283)

III.2.B. The Cross-Cultural Comment

Panikkar’s second comment, cross-cultural in nature, exposes the mono-cultural context and nature of the “option for the poor” and also relativizes the role of will. It reminds us that other cultures often do not start from those premises.

In his words:

Within the framework of dialectical materialism the so-called conscientization leads to despair. With merely historical conscientization the oppressed become conscious that for many of them there will be no liberation at all. In spite of all our most strenuous efforts to opt for the liberation of the oppressed, thousands of children are going to starve today, and millions of refugees and victims of wars are not going to be liberated in their lifetime. We may console ourselves with the view of a brighter future, but what is our answer for those people? Either there is a transhistorical reality (now or later) or there is no hope for them. (283)

We may wonder, in this context, what is the meaning of life for that immense majority – the aboriginals, the slaves, the outcastes, the starving, the sick, the hungry, the oppressed, the women – who have not “made” it? Even in the hardest times and in face of greatest struggles, people could face life with joy and dignity precisely because they have been sustained by some kind of hope. This hope, however, is not merely of the future, but hope in the invisible dimension of life and reality.10

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10 While acknowledging greatly its positive and vital contribution, it is important to discern how, in our contemporary cross-cultural human situation, the cosmic confidence (with its characteristic hope in the invisible) has to meet, in mutual criticism and dialogue, the human confidence (with its characteristic hope of the future), in the backdrop of a rhythmic confidence, ie., a hope in the rhythm of reality. Cf. Anthony Savari Raj, “The ‘Hope’ of Traditions for Human Future,” paper presented at the International Conference on Asian Values and Human Future, from 7-9 July 2015, organized by Don Bosco University Guwahati (Assam), in
Here is where traditional cultures speaking of heaven, *karma*, nirvana, God and brahman have something essential to contribute. To realize that our life has a meaning (sense) which is *life*, even if we have been invited to the banquet of Life just for a few moments, is the only saving hope for many and another exemplification of what I mean by cosmic confidence.\(^{11}\)

**Conclusion**

The response of Panikkar to Knitter, as presented above, indeed signals the role played by cosmic confidence in interreligious spirituality. It even makes us radically rethink our conception of the Divine. The needed confidence is not on the Divine as the ground, but the Divine who is perhaps the sky on which no religion can ever claim to set foot. This indeed evokes a sense of contingency and helplessness which is stronger and more fruitful for collaboration and joint action for human-cosmic welfare than certitude on the Divine as the ground. It is perhaps this move and trust in vertical transcendence that provides a link for the amicable horizontal crossings between peoples and religions and to go ahead in life with a sense of hope – hope, not merely of the future, but in the invisible.

**REFERENCES**


\(^{11}\) Panikkar, “Cosmic Confidence or Preferential Option?”, 283-4.


