

Eruption of truth: An interview with Raimon Panikkar: On inter- and intrareligious dialogue

Cover Story in the [August 16, 2000](#) issue

Raised in Spain by a Catholic mother and a Hindu father, Raimon Panikkar has made interreligious dialogue his life's work. He was ordained a Roman Catholic priest in 1946, and is attached to the diocese of Varanasi in India. Panikkar is the author of some 40 books, including The Unknown Christ of Hinduism, The Trinity and World Religions, The Silence of the Buddha, The Cosmotheandric Reality and, most recently, the revised edition of The Intrareligious Dialogue (Paulist Press, 1999). After many years as professor of religious studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara, he is living in retirement in Spain, revising his Gifford Lectures, "The Rhythm of Being," for publication. He gave this interview to Henri Tincq, religion editor of the Parisian daily Le Monde. The interview has been translated by Joseph Cunneen, coeditor of Cross Currents.

How is it possible to combine a heritage that is both Christian and Hindu?

I was brought up in the Catholic religion by my Spanish mother, but I never stopped trying to be united with the tolerant and generous religion of my father and of my Hindu ancestors. This does not make me a cultural or religious "half-caste," however. Christ was not half man and half God, but fully man and fully God. In the same way, I consider myself 100 percent Hindu and Indian, and 100 percent Catholic and Spanish. How is that possible? By living religion as an experience rather than as an ideology.

How do you explain the Western attraction to Asian religions and philosophies and the fear that this produces in Western churches?

One might well turn the question around and ask instead why the West exercises such an attraction on the East. The answer to your question, however, is that contemporary Christianity has given insufficient attention to many key elements of

human life, such as contemplation, silence and the well-being of the body.

There is in this attraction a salutary slap by the Spirit, which is telling the churches in the West to wake up. The discovery of the other, the search for greater peace of mind and bodily calm, for joy and serenity, are sources of renewal. The whole history of Christianity is one of enrichment and renewal brought about by elements that came from outside itself. Do not Christmas and Easter, and almost all the Christian feasts, have a non-Christian origin? Would it have been possible to formulate the basic Christian doctrines without the hellenic tradition, itself pre-Christian? Doesn't every living body exist in symbiosis with its external milieu?

Then why this fear? If the church wishes to live, it should not be afraid of assimilating elements that come from other religious traditions, whose existence it can today no longer ignore. Prudence, however, is a value that should be maintained; I certainly understand the voice of Catholic authority when it is raised against widespread superficiality.

Don't most conflicts in contemporary society come precisely from the fear of a destruction of identity, a fear that has led to all those forms of religious withdrawal called integralism?

Someone who is afraid of losing his or her identity has already lost it. In the West identity is established through difference. Catholics find their identity in not being Protestant or Hindu or Buddhist. But other cultures have another way of thinking about one's identity. Identity is not based on the degree to which one is different from others.

In the Abrahamic traditions (Judaism, Islam, Christianity), people seek God in difference—in superiority or transcendence. Being divine means not being human. For Hindus, however, the divine mystery is in man, in what is so profound and real in him that he cannot be separated from it, and it cannot be discharged into transcendence. This is the domain of immanence, of that spiritual archetype that is called brahman. In the Hindu system, people are not afraid of losing their identity. They can be afraid of losing what they have, but not of losing what they are.

Being afraid is always a bad sign. Christ says, "I give you peace" and "Do not be afraid." Contemporary Christians feel surrounded and are afraid of being dissolved. But what does the gospel say? "You are the salt of the earth." The salt has to be dissolved in order for the food to be more tasty. The leaven is there to make the

bread rise. The Christian vocation is to lose oneself in others. From an institutional or disciplinary point of view, I can understand today's reactions of prudence in the churches. But the duty of the Christian is to be dissolved, to "lose one's life," in order to communicate it to others. The Christian faith even tells us that by losing our life we gain it. It is here that we find the meaning of the resurrection.

You believe in interreligious dialogue. On what conditions can it succeed?

The days are over when religions could take refuge in splendid isolation. In Europe, for example, religious people can no longer ignore the existence of the millions of foreigners with different cultures who are now living there. They can no longer ignore the fact that, across three quarters of our planet, the dominant religion is not Christianity. Hence there must be dialogue; the question is, what kind?

We must distinguish between *interreligious* dialogue and *intrareligious* dialogue. The first confronts already-established religions and deals with questions of doctrine and discipline. Intrareligious dialogue is something else. It does not begin with doctrine, theology and diplomacy. It is intra, which means that if I do not discover in myself the terrain where the Hindu, the Muslim, the Jew and the atheist may have a place—in my heart, in my intelligence, in my life—I will never be able to enter into a genuine dialogue with him.

As long as I do not open my heart and do not see that the other is not an other but a part of myself who enlarges and completes me, I will not arrive at dialogue. If I embrace you, then I understand you. All this is a way of saying that real intrareligious dialogue begins in myself, and that it is more an exchange of religious experiences than of doctrines. If one does not start out from this foundation, no religious dialogue is possible; it is just idle chatter.

But how does one avoid falling into a vague religious syncretism made up of different expressions of religion?

I am obviously against what is fashionable today, which seems to be a matter of going here and there in search of spiritual satisfaction, and which ends in leading nowhere. The dialogue route that I propose is existential, intimate and concrete. Its purpose is not to establish some universal religion, to end up with a kind of United Nations of religions. Reread Genesis: God destroyed the tower of Babel. Why didn't God want a world government, a world bank, a world democracy? Why did God think it better, to facilitate communication among men and women, for them to live in

small huts on a human scale, with windows and streets, rather than on information superhighways?

For a Christian, the answer is in the incarnation: because the divine mystery is made flesh. For the philosopher, it is in order that human relations remain personal. I cannot have human contact with a computer; a machine is not a person. Genuine dialogue between religions, therefore, ought to be this duologue: between you and me, between you and your neighbor; it should be like a rainbow where we are never sure where one color begins and another ends.

But can one still speak of religion, if one is not convinced of possessing the truth?

When, during his trial, Jesus is asked “What is truth?” he does not answer. Or he leaves the answer in silence. In fact, truth does not allow itself to be conceptualized. It is never purely objective, absolute. To talk about absolute truth is really a contradiction in terms. Truth is always relational, and the Absolute (absolutus, untied) is that which has no relation. The pretension of the great religions to possess all truth can only be understood in a limited and contingent context. Not to be conscious of our myths leads to integralism. But in order to be aware of our myths, we need our neighbor, and therefore dialogue and love. The truth is first of all a reality that permits us to live, an existential truth that makes us free.

I am not such a relativist as to believe that the truth is cut up in slices like a cake. But I am convinced that each of us participates in the truth. Inevitably, my truth is the truth that I perceive from my window. And the value of dialogue between the various religions is precisely to help me perceive that there are other windows, other perspectives. Therefore I need the other in order to know and verify my own perspective of the truth. Truth is a genuine and authentic participation in the dynamism of reality. When Jesus says “I am the truth,” he is not asking me to absolutize my doctrinal system but to enter upon the way that leads to life.

Nevertheless, what is the point of believing and committing one’s life to something, if it is not a matter of defending one’s truth? Doesn’t the kind of religious dialogue that you are asking for, in which each would come, first of all, not to defend individual convictions but to share experiences, easily become reduced to a friendly chat?

I hold to my truth. I am even ready to commit my life to it and to die for it. I am simply saying that I do not have a monopoly on truth, and that what is most important is the manner in which you and I enter into that truth, how we perceive it and hear it. Thomas Aquinas said, “You do not possess the truth; it is truth that possesses you.” Yes, we are possessed by truth. That is what makes me live; but the other lives, too, by virtue of her truth. I do not engage myself first of all to defend my truth, but to live it. And the dialogue between religions is not a strategy for making one truth triumphant, but a process of looking for it and deepening it along with others.

The Christian churches strive to insert the message of the gospel into the diversity of cultures. How is it possible to reconcile the respect that you have for other religions and cultures with the necessity, for a Christian like yourself, of “inculturating” the gospel?

It is of *interculturación* that we need to speak—that is, of a meeting between traditions and cultures, and not the implantation of one culture in another. It would only be a proof of colonialism to pretend that one religious message, like the New Testament, has the right and the duty to in-culturate itself everywhere, as if it were something supracultural. The church ought to take existing traditional cultures more seriously, and work for their mutual fecundation. How? By means of that mystical inspiration which is too often missing in its theology. For example, the best way to explain the “scandal” of Christianity to classical Hinduism is not to speak about Christmas or Jesus of Nazareth, but about the risen Christ and even the Eucharist. Do you know that the expression the 16th-century Council of Trent used to describe the Eucharist—“the unique sacrifice that saves the world”—is already found in a Vedic text that appeared 2,000 years earlier? In other words, the sacrifice that saves the world is first of all a kind of commerce between the human and the divine, something the Hindu understands as well as the Christian.

I believe in the incarnation, and I think that after the misadventures of the past 2,000 years Christianity should stop being the religion of the Book and become the religion of the Word—a word that Christians should hear from a Christ who lives, as Paul says, yesterday, today and always. Then their faith can become more of a personal experience. To present the faith to men and women today doesn’t mean trying to introduce a little Thomism here, a little Judaism there, and so forth, but to reach them at their deepest existential, humble and mystical level.

The Christian truth is not the monopoly of a sect, a treatise imposed by a kind of colonization, but an eruption that has existed since the dawn of time, which St. Paul defined very well as “a mystery that has existed since the beginning,” and of which we Christians know only a very small part.

Is that the reason why you are asking for a second Council of Jerusalem, following the example of the first, which decided to stop imposing Jewish rituals on new converts?

The crisis today is not that of one country, one model, one regime; it is a crisis of humanity. A council should be opened whose concerns would no longer be interecclesial—dealing with priests, bishops, women’s ordination and so forth—but would center on far more essential problems. Three quarters of the world’s population live under inhuman conditions. Humanity is in such great distress and insecurity that its leaders believe they must keep 30 million men in arms! The church cannot be a stranger to such distress, to such institutionalized injustice. It cannot remain deaf to the cries of the people, especially of the humble and the poor. The council I propose would certainly not be exclusively Christian but ecumenical, in the sense that it would give a hearing to other cosmologies and religions. Its purpose would be to determine how the Spirit is inspiring humanity to live in peace, and to bear the joyous news of hope.