

# R. Panikkar's Approach to Christology

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Dr Raimundo Panikkar, born of an Indian father and a Spanish mother, is one of the prominent Catholic theologians who have endeavoured to bring the Hindu religious experience and Christian faith into a common form of expression. His numerous writings have approached this problem from a variety of angles, inter-religious dialogue, worship, the mystery of God and the mystery of the Incarnation to mention only a few. In his theological framework Christ and Christology occupy a central position. I shall restrict my remarks principally to two of his works that deal directly with Christology, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*,<sup>1</sup> and *Salvation in Christ: Concreteness and Universality, the Supername*.<sup>2</sup>

The fundamental question in the present context of interreligious dialogue is how Christianity, that claims to be 'the Mystery that God has revealed for the whole world' and Hinduism that considers all religions equal and thus denies the unique character of Christianity, can coexist and enter into a meaningful dialogue. Hinduism says that since all religions are equal and all are already one with a deeper unity, let each one follow his religion and let the religions merely coexist. But, for Christianity faith is not a formula to be believed in but faith in God and Christ, to whom belong both Hinduism and Christianity. So there is need to go beyond the *māyā* of religious separation and embrace all in Christ, though nobody can prefigure the shape of the religion that will emerge 'when Christian waters and the Hindu river merge into a bigger stream'. Though the Hindu will consider ridiculous a proposal to meet together in Christ, and though even a meeting in Vishnu is meaningless for him, the only reasonable way for encounter, according to Panikkar, is in Christ. For, 'Hinduism and Christianity will agree to some extent that both meet in God and that God is working inside both religions as it were'.<sup>3</sup> God is the only author of salvation and Christ as God is the only saviour. Yet, the Hindu is saved in the total religious context provided by his religion. Hence, though it may be true to say that he is saved not *on account of* Hinduism, he is not saved *in spite of* it, but in and through it. If Christ is the one Saviour of all men it may be said that Christ is in

<sup>1</sup> *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*, London, Darton, Longman and Todd, 1964.

<sup>2</sup> *Salvation in Christ: Concreteness and Universality, the Supername*, Santa Barbara, 1972.

<sup>3</sup> *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*, p. 23.

Hinduism too, though unknown and unrecognized. 'Hinduism, because it is a kind of Christianity in potency, because it has already a Christian seed, because it is the desire of fullness, and that fullness is Christ, is already pointing towards it, already contains, indeed, the symbolism of the Christian reality'.<sup>4</sup>

Panikkar finds in the Hindu idea of the Iswara the only link between the apparently irreconcilable poles of the absolute and of the relative, which is one of the functions of Christ as Logos: 'The Principle and End of all things has two natures . . . two faces, two aspects as it were',<sup>5</sup> one identical with the Absolute, and the other, turned towards the 'outside', *yatah*, 'from which'.

*Concreteness and Universality of Christ:* If we pass on from the restricted context of the Hindu-Christian dialogue and the 'unknown Christ' hidden in other religions, to the universality of Christ's mission we reach a wider perspective of Christology. Standing between the 'Minimalists' who will think of the Church as a 'small flock' and the 'remnant' with a very limited and particular mission, and the 'Maximalists' who will think of her as a Noah's Ark that can accommodate all disparate tendencies within the same human communion, Panikkar finds the solution in the divine personality of Christ. Who is Christ? Christ answered that question not directly but by describing what he was doing. His is the only name under heaven given to men by which to attain salvation. But this 'name' which stands for the symbol and reality of what Jesus stands for, should not be restricted to 'the particular God and a Saviour' structure of Jewish thought, nor to the spatio-temporal coordinates of the historically trained Western mind, but has to be translated to other contexts and cultures also. Identity of Christ should not be placed in the notions of singularity and individuality which cannot be approached and participated in, but in that reality 'which is found in the encounter with a person, that knowledge which springs up when we really know and love somebody'.<sup>6</sup>

Hence what is important in Christ is not the historical category which only indicates his personal identification as 'an undoubtedly interesting and probably great man in history', but the personal category which can be reached only through the spirit in love, 'as a "part" or rather "pole" of our personal being'.<sup>7</sup> The Jesus of the Christian believer 'is not simply the historical Jesus but the Risen One, a Jesus who as person enters into the very structure of our own personal existence'.<sup>8</sup>

In this view Christ is saviour because he is the central point that gives cohesion to the universe, and, in the context of the Trinitarian doctrine, the Alpha and Omega, the Pantocrator. This view is in sharp contrast to modern historicism which sees Christ merely as the centre of human history, placing the emphasis on the Man Jesus,

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 59-60.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 127.

<sup>6</sup> *Salvation in Christ*, pp. 32-33.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

the humanity that makes man human and all history salvation history. According to Panikkar, in this view Christ cannot become even the centre of history, since the circle itself as a figure of speech has lost appeal in contemporary thought.

Christ is the universal saviour. But in view of historico-cosmological, psychological, anthropological, and logico-epistemological shifts in contemporary thinking it has to be admitted that there are many saviours, all of them, however, 'embodying that saving power which Christians believe to be the spirit of Jesus'.<sup>9</sup> According to Panikkar, 'Christ, the saviour is, thus, not to be restricted to the merely historical figure of Jesus of Nazareth. Or, as we have already said, the identity of Jesus is not to be confused with historical identification'.<sup>10</sup>

*A Word of Criticism:* From what has been said above, it is clear that Panikkar's special preoccupation is the relevance of Christ to salvation in the so called non-Christian religions. His main endeavour seems to be to shift the Christian emphasis from the humanity of Christ and Jesus of Nazareth to the Logos, the Second Person of the Trinity, who by his relation to humanity is the center of the universe. This Logos concept rings a responsive chord in all religions, especially Hinduism, and explains the possibility of salvation in all religions: All saviours in all religions are in a sense functions of Christ as Logos, and work by the Spirit of Christ. He rightly reacts very strongly against the modern tendency to make Christ merely a man. But in this reaction he seems to have gone too far to the opposite extreme, almost to the point of denying all value to the concrete and historical humanity of Christ. The central mystery of the Incarnation is not the divinity of Christ but his humanity assumed by the Logos. If that humanity is reduced to a mere 'theophany'<sup>11</sup> of some value only to the Jews of Palestine and the people of the Mediterranean world and of their various colonies, the Incarnation, the advent of the Son of God into concrete human history loses its central meaning. The Gospel, the concrete Christ Event is no longer the Good News to All Men; the Logos has been at work in all religions from the very beginning. Christ as a historical category is, for Panikkar, only 'an interesting and probable great man in history', 'an historically relevant figure of the past, with a still uncommon influence on the present'.<sup>12</sup> But, what is of universal value, according to him, is the encounter with the Logos achieved in Jesus of Nazareth. But that manifestation of the Logos in the concrete historical individual of Nazareth was not anything unique. Everything that is, and comes, refers to Christ, the Only Begotten, the center of the cosmic mandala. In this way 'it could be said that every being is a *Christophany*'.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

This sort of interpretation seems to do away with the uniqueness of the Incarnation. For Panikkar the mystery of the Incarnation seems to be exactly the same as that of the Trinity: 'The Trinity is God's self-revelation in the fullness of time, the consummation both of all that God has already "said" of himself to man and of all that man has been able to attain and know of God in his thought and mystical experience'.<sup>14</sup> So just as in the encounter with the Logos and Christ, 'in the Trinity a true encounter of religions takes place which results, not in a vague fusion of mutual dilution, but in authentic enhancement of all the religions and even cultural elements that are contained in each'.<sup>15</sup> For Panikkar 'the unity of the human race' and its common history are just myths, just like the contemporary idea of the democratic constitution of man.<sup>16</sup> Hence, Christ as the focal point of the total history of humanity on which the Christian Gospel and Christian Mission are based seem to be rejected by Panikkar.

<sup>14</sup> R. Panikkar, *The Trinity and World Religions*, Madras: C.L.S. 1970, p. 42.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Salvation in Christ*, p. 55.