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Book Review: "The Experience of God: Icons of the Mystery"

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distinctive demands of both traditions at one and the same time.

The goal of such a complex, interreligious reading does not, it seems, differ essentially from the goal of each text on its own terms: namely, surrender to a personal God. And, when Clooney takes up the question of surrender and its consequences in the life of faith more explicitly in chapters four and five, his focus subtly shifts from merely reading a Shrivaisnava text Christian-ly to imagining what it might be like to become the kind of Christian who gives herself Shrivaisnava-ly, in a manner deeply informed by the meditations and spiritual vision of Deshika's *Essence*. Most dramatically perhaps, after and out of Deshika's detailed exegesis of the Dvaya Mantra – "I approach for refuge the feet of Narayana with Shri; obeisance to Narayana with Shri" – Clooney locates a comparable mantra in Jesus' own act of self-surrender – "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit" – which Christian believers can and must make their own. Clooney recognises stark differences between the two visions, to be sure: Deshika aims for exegetical precision, de Sales for death and resurrection, and both name the God to whom we must surrender with a specificity that does not permit combination or compromise. At some level, any attempt to bring them together will inevitably end in failure.

Yet Clooney makes the provocative claim that such failure, when it arises as a consequence

of the sustained reading and reasoning modeled in *Beyond Compare*, will actually intensify the practice of both spiritual classics, separately and together. "Without the rhetoric of exclusivism and pluralism and without the comforts enjoyed by those who know only their own tradition or (seemingly) no tradition at all," he writes, "the reader . . . finds older habits and comforts no longer possible. Now unsettled by both texts, she or he comes closer to the precipice of a real act of loving surrender" (186). This claim is both beautiful and frustratingly asymptotic. In the conclusion, Clooney is back to comparison, describing Deshika and de Sales's respective accounts of life after loving surrender and reflecting briefly on the possibility of new persons and communities, Hindu and Christian, which might be effected through this kind of comparative study. Readers who have been waiting for him to advance a clear resolution or to take up some of those issues of truth he has "patiently deferred" in previous works will certainly find themselves rather annoyed at the end of this book, possibly to the point of giving up.

Indeed, writing as a devout Catholic, in a Shrivaisnava manner, this may be exactly Clooney's ambition.

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***The Experience of God: Icons of the Mystery.* Raimon Panikkar. Translated by Joseph Cunneen. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006, 148 pp.**

EARLY on in this book Raimon Panikkar remarks on the paradoxical and indeed impossible nature of its title: we finite humans cannot by definition have an experience of God because God is not an object and certainly not an object of our finite discourse and experience. Nor can we, strictly speaking, talk of the experience of God in the subjective genitive, for, as Panikkar says, "There cannot be a genitive in God, for that would add nothing to what God is.

Even the verb *to be* is inappropriate" (p. 7). Panikkar embraces the paradox as both necessary and inevitable in the hope that awareness of this paradoxicality may relativize both our language and our conceptions of the Divine.

Two comments before launching into a discussion of the book and its contents. The book had its genesis in a series of seminars given to theology professors at the Benedictine

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Monastery in Silos in northern Spain (a monastery now made famous through its best-selling CDs of Gregorian chant). That accounts for its informal tone and the absence of any scholarly apparatus. It has the form of a theological meditation touching on a fair number of favored themes rather than a systematic treatise. It is written for the most part in a direct and straight-forward style, though not without the dialectical and speculative subtleties for which Panikkar is well known. Even though it stands on its own as a work of apophatic theology, it helps to know something about Panikkar's substantial prior corpus of writing, this book appearing at the end of almost 60 years and as many volumes of sustained theological effort. Those overawed by that productivity might find here a distillation of some of his ideas and insights dealing with the topic of our experience of God.

Secondly, given his immediate audience, the ethos and language of the book are predominantly Christian, but as befits someone who has engaged in inter-religious study and dialogue for most of his long life—Panikkar will be 91 this year—his Christianity is not structured and demarcated by creed or doctrine. Indeed, it is a Christianity that has deliberately opened itself to global wisdom and truth, and has sought to “expand” and interpret Christian spirituality through this global heritage. What allows him to do so is his mystical and philosophical register, which makes this a work of sapiential theology offered to all who seek spiritual insight and sustenance.

The book is divided into four chapters. This first, “Speaking of God,” deals with the phenomenology and the “grammar” of “God.” God for Panikkar is the symbol of ultimate reality, which infinitely exceeds our conceptual grasp, but which nonetheless, as Saint Augustine put it in his *Confessions*, is the “most intimate aspect of oneself.” God is at one and the same time our Ground and Source and our End and Destination. Given that God is a symbol and not a concept, Panikkar in his second chapter, “The Experience of God,” deals with the constitutive elements of that experience in faith, tradition, and religious praxis, while in the third chapter, “The Christian Experience of God,” he tackles the specific Christian ideas about Jesus and

Christ, their place in the Christian Trinity and the scriptural basis for his particular interpretations. Finally in the fourth and last chapter, “Privileged Places of the Experience of God,” Panikkar touches on the spiritual dimensions of our existential life in such phenomena as love, joy, suffering, evil, pardon, nature, and above all silence.

Given the broad scope of the book, I shall dwell on just three themes that run throughout the book: (1) his *advaitic* vision of reality, (2) its expression in the Christian Trinity, and (3) the implications of this theology for spiritual life.

The Advaitic Vision

Panikkar is at great pains to distinguish his *advaitic* vision of reality from two competing stances, dualism and monism. In dualism God is seen as “wholly other” and there is an infinite distance between Creator and creature. If so, it is difficult to see how we can truly speak of a relationship between the two. Monism by contrast tends toward pantheism and the erasure of difference between God and the world, as in Spinoza's *Deus sive Natura*. In Panikkar's non-dualist vision, however, God is distinct but not separate from the world. As he puts it

God is neither the Same (monism) nor the Other (dualism). God is one pole of reality, a constitutive pole. Although silent and ineffable in itself, it nevertheless speaks to us. It is transcendent but immanent in the world, infinite but delimited in things. This pole is nothing in itself. It exists only in its polarity, in its relationship. God is relationship, intimate internal relationship with all. (p. 63)

Panikkar takes this basic idea of “internal relationship with all” to postulate a triadic model of reality comprising the Divine, the Human, and the Cosmic in thoroughgoing relationality. The terms “God,” “Man,” and “World” are three artificially substantivized forms of the adjectives which together constitute reality. This is Panikkar's cosmotheandric version of the Buddhist *pratityasamutpada*. There are no such things or beings as God, Man, or World

considered as independent entities. Not only are they dependent on each other, but this dependence is "internal," i.e., constitutive of their very being. It is clear that Panikkar is no monotheist and in fact finds monotheism to be both theologically untenable and spiritually alienating. Panikkar therefore insists on the centrality of the Trinity to Christian life.

The Christian Trinity

Panikkar's cosmotheandricism is a secularized version of his interpretation of the Trinity. The three interpenetrating and mutually constitutive dimensions of the Divine, the Human, and the Cosmic are transposed onto the structure of the Trinity. God is intrinsically relational.

The Trinity is as much a challenge to monism as to dualism. 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. And if God is neither "one" nor "three," what does the Trinity mean? Precisely that: God is neither one nor three. God does not allow himself to be enclosed in any number...hence it is inaccurate to say that God is three persons. The concept of person applied to the Trinity, to Father, Son, and Spirit, is univocal (three absolutely equal persons would be three Gods), nor is it analogical. As St. Thomas says, speaking of three persons is a concession to current language and nothing can be called "three" in the Trinity. If I utilize the word *person*, applied to three persons, and the three persons are not equal (that would be a tritheism), they would then be analogues. But if they were analogues, there would have to be a *primum analogatum* (a primary reference in the analogy), superior and prior to the three persons which founds their analogy and permits it to apply analogically....But that would be the famous *quaternitas* that the church condemned....(p. 64)

The Trinitarian structure for Panikkar is a *perichoresis*, a mutual indwelling of Father, Son, and Spirit just as there is a similar

perichoresis of the three dimensions of reality, the Divine, the Human, and the Cosmic. Indeed, the Trinity functions as the source of the dynamism of Reality. It generates forms which are never limited by specific formations or realizations. Between the "emptiness" of the Father as primal source, the form of the Son, and the energy and indwelling of the Spirit there is continual and unceasing interaction just as there is between the Divine, the Human, and the Cosmic. Panikkar is by no means alone in articulating the logic of the Trinity philosophically and with reference to the whole of reality. Like Hegel and his logical "translation" of the Trinity to his entire system, Panikkar in a quite different mode—via non-dualism—envisions the Trinity as a model of Reality.

Implications for Spiritual Life

What this means for life, which for Panikkar is irreducibly spiritual, is an intrinsic relatedness to God which grounds our participation and sharing in the Divine life.

Those who have lived the experience of God in one way or another have lost their everyday working identities. All that is left to them is what we might call their profound identity. The experience of God is understood, therefore, as subjective genitive—God's experience. It is not my experience of God. God is not an object—of either faith or experience. It is the experience of God that occurs (*experiri*) within me, in which I participate more or less consciously. In this sense, however, the phrase is inexact, since to say that God is part of my experience requires Trinitarian precision: it is the Son in the Spirit that constitutes this divine experience.

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*. That is divinization.(137)

There are many "places" or occasions for this divinization as we attempt through

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contemplation, devotion, and action to open ourselves to and participate in the divine life within us. Panikkar has interesting things to say about love and joy, suffering and evil as pointed out earlier, but he singles out silence as the privileged site for our encounter with God. In line with his apophatism Panikkar reminds us that the highest knowledge of God is not to know. "Every time we name God—every time we conceptualize God—we commit a profanation, a blasphemy" (129). Thus we are led to a profound silence encompassing out intellect, will, and action that attempts in spiritual passivity to let life unfold and in purity of heart and clarity of mind to mold it in an attitude of *niskama karma* (action without egoistic desire).

The flavor and beauty of this silence are best conveyed by Angelus Silesius in *Der cherubinische Wandersmann* (*The Cherubic Pilgrim*), from which Panikkar quotes:

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 can rest completely in silence,

Then God will give you more blessings than you would know how to ask for.

If you wish to express the being of eternity,

You must first 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. (130)

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Yoga: India's Philosophy of Meditation. Edited by Gerald James Larson and Ram Shankar Bhattacharya. Volume XII of the *Encyclopedia of Indian Philosophies*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2008, 784 pp.

WITH Karl Potter as its General Editor, the 27 volume *Encyclopedia of Indian Philosophies* was begun in 1981. Each volume consists of two parts: an introductory essay on the history and philosophy of the school of thought, followed by English language summaries of the key texts by leading scholars. This model has proved very useful for scholars and students who may not know Sanskrit well enough to read the school's primary texts in the original. In a single volume, one has an authoritative presentation of the main teachings of the philosophical school together with summaries of its major texts. Gerald Larson and Ram Shankar Bhattacharya previously brought out the *Samkhya* volume in the series, and now they have completed the *Yoga* volume, which depends on *Samkhya* thought for its

philosophical foundation. Larson lists the goals of this volume as: 1) showing in what sense *Yoga* is a philosophical school of India; 2) determining the boundaries between *Yoga* as a philosophy and *Yoga* as a tradition of practice; 3) elucidating to what degree *Yoga's* experiential/practice claims can be separated from its philosophical claims; and 4) clarifying the meaning of the term "yoga." The book largely achieves these goals.

This is the only book I know that disentangles and gives critical analysis to the practice or *yoganga* (II.28 – III.5) portion of the *Yoga Sutras* (YS) as distinct from the more philosophical sections. In this regard Larson helpfully shows that *Yoga* as a collection of experimental practices and ascetic exercises