2021


Enrico Beltramini
Notre Dame de Namur University

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Recommended Citation
Available at: https://doi.org/10.7825/2164-6279.1800

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BOOK REVIEWS


The publication of some extracts of Raimon Panikkar's diary is good news for scholars. While the compilation offers no sensational insights, it does help round up both the appreciation and the assessment of Panikkar the intellectual and Panikkar the human being. Panikkar himself selected the extracts, then Milena Carrara Pavan, who is also the curator of Panikkar's opera omnia, organized and edited the content. The criteria behind Panikkar's selection are unknown, but in classic Panikkar-esque style, he said in a letter to Carrara that the selected notes are his life and yet they are not; in fact, publication of the entire diary is in progress. Carrara's title, The Water of the Drop: Fragments from Panikkar Diaries (henceforth, Fragments), resonates with Panikkar's eschatological orientation, for we are all already water without ceasing to be drops, although not all realize that.

More than half of the extracts relate to the period after Panikkar's retirement from academic teaching at UC Santa Barbara and his relocation to Tavertet, a small town in Catalonia. In this review, I will address the English version, partially translated by Geraldine Clarkson, a translation from the original manuscript in Italian. The English version presents only a few, and almost marginal at that, differences from Panikkar's original. It also carries errors of translation and typographical errors. Despite being a relatively small portion of the entire diary, the published fragments confirm some hypotheses already articulated, although not yet confirmed, by Panikkar scholars. Here I offer a brief and incomplete list: Panikkar's self-perception as a mystic, his monastic vocation, and the importance of his sacerdotal status. The book also reveals aspects of Panikkar less known, that is, his sense of solitude and isolation, his need for friends and friendly relationships, and his apparent estrangement from the rest of the human race.

I will focus here on three main themes rather than attempting to recap a book that by its very nature resists summarization. The first theme is India: "I am in love with a traditional Indian culture that is collapsing" (99). Panikkar visited India for the first time in 1954, in his mid-thirties, and it was a turning point for several reasons. He found himself not only in contact with a foreign millennial civilization, but also with religious pluralism. During that trip, he established contacts and friendships that marked his life and influenced his intellectual trajectory. He came back from that trip with insights that would take a lifetime of study and reflection to fructify. Portions of Fragments, however, indicate that he denies India really changed his vision. Instead, the vision came to him internally, so to speak, like a
germination from within and at an early age (181). Panikkar returned to India in the fifties and sixties and, for regular but short periods, in the seventies. In his diary, Panikkar asks rhetorically if his time in India, in a little apartment in Varanasi with a view on the Ganges was, after all, the best of his life (166). Fragments records Panikkar’s changing attitude towards India: he laments the assimilation of technological and mechanistic paradigms within the fabric of Indian society and religious practices and in his notes silently warns Indians to remain a religiously driven, pre-industrial, eventually pastoral society—the reality he encountered in his first trip there (17). In one note, Panikkar ultimately rescinds his interior connection with India (157). At the end, the post-Independence, democratic, rural India fitted Panikkar perfectly, but not so much the economic and social evolution of a country on the verge of rapid modernization. One might ask whether Panikkar would fit into the current process of hyper-modernization of South Asia, including the emergence of nationalist cultural stances and economic paradigms. Actually, Panikkar remained attached to the reality of India he encountered in the fifties, and he probably mirrored that reality in his works, including the late ones. Surely, the questions he raised (the search for the Absolute, the integrity of all) are, so to speak, eternal; the context in which he addressed these questions in books, speeches, and lectures is, however, gone.

The second theme is sanctity. “I believe in a new life style in sacred-secular holiness” (102). Panikkar joined the Obra, what the Spanish members colloquially called Opus Dei, in 1940. He left (or, if one has to trust the official evidence, he was expelled) in 1966. He never joined another religious order and remained a secular priest for the rest of his life. Fragments makes clear that Panikkar’s major scope in life was to reach his own sainthood, namely, to become a saint (18). He attempted to accomplish this goal through the way offered by Opus Dei, namely, through a path to sanctity (a constant work to reach perfection, Matthew 5:48) in the world. His contemplative orientation, however, made him feel compressed in such a military-like organization as Opus Dei (28). Despite his numerous claims, expressed in Fragments and elsewhere, that he was a monk and had a hermitical vocation, he never chose solitude or retracted into a cloister, ashram, or monastery. Instead, he built his own hermitage in Tavertet, but he simultaneously matched that choice with his marriage. It might be that his years in Opus Dei affected him more than he thought (291). His celebrated concept of “sacred secularity” is a brilliant reformulation of the way to holiness as articulated by Spanish priest and Opus founder Josemaria Escriva in his collection of maxims concerning spirituality for people involved in secular affairs. Panikkar’s mission in the world, to provide spiritual and intellectual assistance to people in search of their way to divinization, resembles that of Opus Dei. Had he remained in Opus Dei, Panikkar could have probably sought sanctity in the reign of the intellectual professions. But this was not his real vocation (30). After leaving Opus Dei, he crafted his own way piece by piece, building an unclear path that made him a multi-dimensional person—simultaneously a philosopher, theologian, mystic, guru, priest, and poet. He was something to everyone, but who knows if, inwardly, he found his narrow path to sainthood (44-5). Only God knows.
The third theme is legacy. “I feel like I am continuously pestered by an inner voice that tells me I am destined for a higher function, a more important role, a more universal profession (than that of university professor)” (131). Despite his repeated claims of indifference to the mundane fortunes of this world, on several occasions Panikkar questioned his own legacy. He lived with surprise—although not disappointment—about what he perceived to be a relatively modest impact on the history of the world (95-6). He shared with other giants of the twentieth century, including Karl Barth and Henri de Lubac, the inclination to see reality from a spiritual perspective. And much like Barth in Switzerland and de Lubac in France, he attempted to elaborate a remedy that was at once spiritual and theological. Unlike Barth and de Lubac, however, he never ignited a “controversy” that was at the same time theological and political (“political” in the sense that challenges the establishment’s ideology). Several entries of Fragments testify that, for temperament and circumstances, Panikkar carefully avoided academic debates and doctrinal disagreements. If one were to take Panikkar’s words at face value, he never raised an argument of the magnitude of Barth’s and de Lubac’s, mostly for lack of courage, not of intellectual stamina (184). He recognized that his life was much more private than, say, that of Heidegger, and with that he probably meant that he did not make himself a public figure (198). His disagreement with the mainstream ideology of the Church was rather consummated in the private circle of his friends, disciples, and followers, and in the internal space of his conscience. His distance from the academic world is equally documented in the diary (138). On the concrete ground of practical (and risky) decisions, his more dramatic form of protest was his marriage. But Fragments offers several alternative motivations for that union, and the entire question is still open to debate (105). In the end, he saw his legacy in his life, words, and books—and in that precise order (220-1).

The volume cannot be properly regarded as a contribution to the field of Panikkar scholarship; still, it provides details and angles of observations that might help scholars advance in their investigation of the sage of Tavertet. The book belongs in every academic library and could be used fruitfully—in whole or in part—in graduate and advanced undergraduate classrooms in the fields of theology or religions and interfaith dialogue.

Enrico Beltramini
Notre Dame de Namur University


**BUTLER** University professor Chad M. Bauman has produced another well-researched book on Christianity in India, once again focusing on anti-Christian violence. His previous monographs include the award-winning *Christian Identity and Dalit Religion in Hindu India, 1868-1947* (2008), and *Pentecostals, Proselytization, and Anti-Christian Violence in Contemporary India*