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The Hermit above a Sea of Music: A Poet's View of Raimundo Panikkar*

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Raimundo Panikkar (1918–2010) was the son of a Catalan mother and an Indian father. After studying science, philosophy and theology in Spain, Germany and Italy, he left for India at the end of 1954, and began his explorations into the traditions of the land of his ancestors. Later on, he wrote: 'I left a Christian, discovered I was Hindu, and now I return a Buddhist, without ceasing to be a Christian'. He became a close friend of Henri Le Saux (Swami Abhishiktananda), one of the founders of Shantivanam, and together they made several pilgrimages to some of the most important holy places of India. Although remaining resident in India, Panikkar returned often to Europe and travelled in many parts of the world giving lectures on Indian philosophy, culture and religion; he held professorships at Harvard and at the University of California at Santa Barbara, and taught in New York, Cambridge, Montreal, and many universities in Latin America. At the end of his university career in 1987, Panikkar returned to Catalonia, and moved to the small village of Tavertet, in the foothills of the Pyrenees; there he founded Vivarium, a centre for intercultural studies. Panikkar wrote in many languages, and was the author of more than fifteen hundred journal articles and about sixty books published in various countries. A project to publish his Opera Omnia in Italian, French, Spanish and English is now in train; the English-language edition, issued by Orbis Books, will comprise eighteen volumes. (Ed.)

Friendships—for I regarded Raimundo Panikkar as a friend—do not depend primarily upon time. We can meet people regularly over many years without becoming their friend; this is sad but true. Equally, we may meet certain people for a few hours—even for a few minutes—and take away the impression that something deep inside us has changed; that the encounter has altered us, that something within us has opened up which was closed, or at least unrecognised, before. That

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person will never be forgotten, and they have contributed something of value which will remain with us perhaps for ever.

Something like this was my experience of Raimundo Panikkar. I met him only quite briefly: I think, on just three occasions, in the years 2000 and 2001. We met twice in Tavertet, at the Vivarium and also in his house; and once in Switzerland, where we spent several days at an international conference. I am not a scholar of religions, though I suppose as an Englishman who, if pressed, describes himself as Buddhist, I necessarily have an interest in inter-religious dialogue, or perhaps embody something of it in myself in an unspoken way. My contact with Panikkar was altogether non-academic and informal. But in a way that is difficult to define, it left something permanent with me, something which has been present frequently not so much in my thoughts as in my feelings ever since. Panikkar has remained with me not primarily by the things he said—though several of his sayings have reverberated in my mind ever since; and not by anything in particular that he did—though his way of doing things was indeed distinctive. Yet both of these contributed to the impression, as did his visual appearance: his distinctive clothing, his facial expression, his way of speaking. Much, I think, was communicated by his surroundings: by his house and its setting, into which he seemed to fit so perfectly. Perhaps it was his smile which above all endeared him to me. It was a smile boyish, slightly mischievous, full of fun and enthusiasm, and seeming entirely spontaneous.

Owing to the nature of the circumstances, I never heard him deliver an academic paper or lecture, and I never heard him give spiritual advice. I felt no inclination to regard him as an infallible guru. He was simply a companion: a fellow-worker in a project which, as it turned out, did not last very long; and a friend with whom, one day, Dr Kapila Vatsyayan and I enjoyed a few hours exploring some Swiss mountains—the three of us feeling very much, I believe, like children who for a few hours had been let out of school, and could run wild without the stern supervision of parents or teachers. And yet from this minimal contact, and after a decade during which I remember little about the many other people I encountered around the same time and in the course of the same project, it is Raimundo Panikkar who stands out, and whom I see in my mind's eye as vividly as ever, not with nostalgia, and not merely with friendship, but with love.

Panikkar was connected, through his friendships with both Dr Kapila Vatsyayan and the poet and scholar Kathleen Raine, with the

Temenos Academy in London. Temenos had begun simply as a journal of arts, ideas and traditional spiritual wisdom; but it had grown into almost a miniature university, holding lectures, seminars and reading groups on philosophy and the arts in the light of the sacred traditions of East and West. It was partly through this connection with Temenos, I believe, that both Panikkar and I came to be invited to work on an international project.

It was a project which aimed at those ever-elusive objects, nuclear disarmament and world peace. Its basic idea was at once so ingenious and so simple that it had immediate appeal. Everyone, from heads of state to the waiter in the restaurant where we held some of our meetings, was eager to sign up. I believe that, left in its original simple form, it might actually have worked. But of course it did not. Like so many human endeavours it lost impetus, became mired in disagreement, and gradually fell away. Now, like a thousand other well-intentioned schemes, it has vanished as if it had never been, and probably no trace of it remains.

And yet that is not quite true, for without it I would not have met Raimundo Panikkar. For it came about one day in the year 2000 that I and my two or three companions found ourselves in the remote village of Tavertet, in the rocky and precipitous limestone hills outside Barcelona, late in the autumn. We had been given permission to stay at the Vivarium, a little way above the village, for a few days whilst we worked on a draft of our manifesto—which, we believed, would change the world forever. During the days, we worked in the seminar room; we went down into the village twice a day to have our meals in the village *cantina*—no simple business, since none of us spoke a word of Spanish. And at night we slept in makeshift beds—I think, on mattresses or perhaps with sleeping-bags—on the floors of small side-rooms in the Vivarium. Sleeping was not altogether easy: not only because of the hardness of the floor (as I remember it) but because outside the window a bird persistently and beautifully sang with the most piercing sweetness. Perhaps it was a nightingale: I like to think so, though I never found out.

On the day after our arrival we were invited to go and meet Raimundo Panikkar himself. We walked across the meadow behind the Vivarium, up the slopes and terraces of the white rock to his house, his hermitage. The hermitage was, as I remember it, a single-storey building of white stone, perched at the highest point of the slope,

so that it overlooked the vast sweep of the valley which spread out below the limestone cliffs. (I know now that it had two storeys; but in memory I see it as a low building, with only one.) And there was a bell, a Tibetan bell. Did we ring it to gain entrance? I can't remember. I can see the bell quite clearly, its greyish metal sides decorated with Tibetan characters and other figurings, and it has something red at the top. A tassel, a ribbon? Perhaps it hung from a red cord at the door. I don't know. But the bell itself seemed to have something important to say. I knew that we were here to visit a Christian Catholic priest; but it was the voice of a Tibetan Buddhist bell that would summon him.

A secretary or assistant opened the door and welcomed us in. We were taken to meet Panikkar himself. I was at once struck by two things. One was the warmth of his welcome, which was not effusive but gentle and quiet, yet given with a smile which seemed to treat each person there as an intimate friend who could be entirely trusted. His politeness was not a thing of etiquette or good manners, it was an outflow of complete kindness. He seemed to be welcoming us, not so much into his house, as into his heart. I was tongue-tied, but I felt that had I been alone with this man, he was someone to whom I could have opened my heart without hesitation or holding back.

The other thing which struck me was Panikkar's clothing. Rather than any form of priestly garb—the black suit and the white 'dog-collar' of the off-duty Anglican clergyman, or the cassock of the Catholic priest—Panikkar wore a shawl or robe of what I can only describe as a greyish-gold colour, which seemed to be made of very fine wool. I was used to the company of Buddhist monks, and his garb seemed closer to their traditional yellow robes than to any ecclesiastical dress I had ever encountered. Instead of making him impressive or intimidating, in some curious way his robe seemed almost to make him appear vulnerable. Rather than being an armour that set him apart from us, this soft radiant robe invited one to touch and stroke it. Subliminally, one could not help catching a hint of the small child in its blanket. Together with Panikkar's delightfully spontaneous smile, it rendered him an utterly unthreatening presence.

He took us into his study, where there was a long wall completely covered with books: a whole large library which I could not help regarding with both awe and—I confess it—envy. And then, as one turned away, still astonished, from the riches of his books, one was stunned for a moment by a still greater richness in the form of the view

from the window, which looked out over the slopes that ran down to the edge of the limestone escarpment and over the cliffs to a vast valley of fields and forests, edged by precipitous white outcrops of rock, with a river and a dam just visible in the far distance and the deep blue of the sky, just darkening towards twilight, arching over the whole.

Given the keynote struck by that Tibetan bell at the entrance to the house, one found oneself half-consciously visualising the whole scene as a Tibetan *thangka*: Panikkar's house perched on the summit of a mountain, perhaps as the abode of a minor deity or an incarnate master such as Milarepa, with the world of *samsāra* unfolding below on its various levels: humans and animals, titans, ghosts and unfortunate beings arrayed on the stone shelves of the land amongst the trees and streams down to the valley floor. It seemed a place from which the world could be serenely surveyed: yet not with indifference or unfeeling detachment, for we were there with our plans and our ideas, and Panikkar listened patiently and sympathetically as we sat round his table and explained our project. He offered us drinks—I don't think I am fantasising when I say that he gave us wine, though I'm not certain—and he agreed to give us his active help.

And, for our first visit, that was all. We left, I think, the following day, having secured his promise of co-operation and drawn up preliminary plans for some kind of manifesto or statement. We returned a few weeks later for a longer stay. This time Panikkar worked with us at times to help us draft our document. He also dined with us. Knowing that he had been a friend of Martin Heidegger, I took the opportunity to ask him what he thought about Heidegger's relationship with the Nazi party—something which was being much discussed in Britain at the time. Panikkar answered readily, telling me that he had in fact discussed the same matter with Heidegger himself. Panikkar told me that in his opinion it had been a matter of sheer human egoism. Heidegger had admitted to him that he had been tempted with the Rectorship of Freiburg University—the University's highest office—and that out of pure vanity he had been unable to resist. Heidegger had joined the Nazi party as a mere matter of form because it was required in order for him to hold the post. He had had no interest in Nazism or in politics.

While we were at Tavertet on this second occasion, I gained some other impressions of Panikkar. One was that he was not altogether happy in his rôle as public guru. He was willing to do what he

could, when people demanded of him that he give talks and make pronouncements on all kinds of matters, but he did it out of duty rather than inclination. He felt that there was something subtly false about the persona he had been forced to develop in response to his local disciples, where he was required to offer public advice and opinions to large audiences almost on a weekly basis. His natural simplicity and humanity were ill at ease in such circumstances. He preferred, I think, to speak to just one or two people. Here he need have no public persona.

I have since wondered whether some small tinge of such feelings also formed an ingredient in Panikkar's ingenious coinage of so many novel technical terms. Cosmotheandric—or, contrariwise, theanthropocosmic; ecosophy; tempiternity; katachronism; sophodicy; and others. Academic scholars are well known for their love of technical terminology, which the unsympathetic term 'jargon'. Most often, such terminology has the aim of narrowing meanings, of making finer and more exact distinctions between things. Most of Panikkar's terms seem to function quite differently. On the contrary, they tend to bring things together, to merge opposites, to embody a critique of artificial separations. They are, if you like, synthetic rather than analytical. But I believe that Panikkar rarely did anything from just one motive. A complex man who looked at things from many sides, he took, I think, a certain delight in playing with language in this way. I suspect that for him, coining neologisms was amongst other things a game. He simply enjoyed it, rather as Lewis Carroll did, seeing it as a kind of solemn linguistic joking. I also suspect that he enjoyed playing more conventional scholars at their own game. 'They like technical terms?' I imagine him saying, 'then let them have technical terms—more than they bargain for.' To confront sober scholars, accustomed to putting everything into sealed compartments, with terminology that spliced their concepts together or dissolved their boundaries, was perhaps a source of quiet amusement to him.

But to return to the year 2000. On our last day at Tavertet, after Panikkar had again been down to the Vivarium to help us with our work, I walked back with him in the later afternoon up to his hermitage. As we climbed the hill, I was struck by the sounds around us. The long grass of the hillside was alive with a many-toned chorus of insects: buzzing, humming, droning, chirping on different notes; over this, from the trees at the edges of the fields, were the songs of the birds, fluting, calling, echoing. I stopped, and Panikkar stopped also. His face

lit up with a beatific smile. For a long time we stood and listened. We were surrounded by, immersed in, music: the whole hillside was an ocean of unceasing natural music. At last I said to Panikkar, simply, 'Music!' Panikkar turned to me with absolute delight on his face. 'Yes!' he whispered with a kind of delighted intensity. He seemed to rejoice, as if at last someone had solved a puzzle when he had almost given up hope of their ever seeing the point. We stood there together a little longer, surrounded by the sea of music, above which the hermitage seemed to float, weightless, and above time.

It was nearly a year later that I met Panikkar once again. This time it was in Switzerland, at a grand hotel near Interlaken where the organisers of our project had arranged an international conference of politicians, philosophers, religious figures and philanthropists. We were a motley crew, but perhaps for that reason no less fitted for our task. I was delighted to find some friends among the crowd, among them the Poet-Laureate of Taiwan, and Dr Kapila Vatsyayan. And there was Raimundo Panikkar. The conference made its difficult way over several days, with drafts of documents written, amended, rejected, written again. How little I now remember of all that!

What remains clear in my mind is the day when, during a break in the conference, Dr Vatsyayan, Panikkar and I thankfully escaped from the velvet prison of the hotel, with its enormous meals that nonetheless seemed to contain so little real nourishment. We took a taxi into the nearby mountains, and there we found a chairlift, which silently and magically floated us one by one—Dr Vatsyayan in her elegant sari, Panikkar in his golden robe of wool, and me in my English coat and trousers, like three unexpected minor spirits or *gandhabbas*—up through the air, over the vast and silent spaces of the forest, and at last to a landing-place among the snow-covered peaks, where we could contemplate a small lake of the most radiant turquoise. We strolled along by this lake, we talked and laughed, and we felt, as I have said, like a group of children released for a few hours from school. We discussed many things, and Panikkar had an original and striking view on each. I remember him saying that the Chinese desire to control Tibet stemmed from an understanding that the Tibetan snows were the source of Asia's rivers; water would become the world's most precious commodity, and who controlled Tibet would one day control the water. He speculated upon the plight of the so-called 'developed' world at the future time when the supply of oil would be exhausted, as one day it must. It was clear

that his perspective on the world was not that of the moment, but of broad stretches of time. He thought in centuries or millennia; our own situation was always related to vast reaches of time, or the whole human situation on earth.

And he had aphorisms: he said things which stayed in my memory and which even now I find myself quoting almost every day. 'There is no such thing as a chemically pure religion,' he would say when people argued about orthodoxy or correctness. And 'It is not possible for everyone in the world to have a job; but it is possible for everyone in the world to have work,'—a thought which he attributed to his friend Ivan Illich. His utterances were pieces of very simple wisdom, but extremely profound.

At the end of our conference when, having failed to solve the world's problems, we were about to leave the Swiss town of Zug, a taxi came for Panikkar. We embraced, and I tried to tell him how much his friendship had meant to me. The intensity of the moment has made me forget what either of us said, but he had already given me one of the last copies of his great masterwork, *The Vedic Experience*—a book which my friend and mentor, the poet Kathleen Raine, in her last years used to read every night before sleeping. Panikkar has inscribed it to me as 'These songs which reverberate in us as remembrance of a meeting of hearts and minds'. As I embraced Panikkar there in Switzerland, I was certain that we would never meet again.

And indeed we did not. I tried to arrange for him to visit and speak to the Temenos Academy in London, and it seemed that it might happen. But in reality he was not strong enough and the visit was cancelled. However, there was one further practical result of our meeting. One morning in Switzerland, Panikkar had announced at breakfast that he had been unable to sleep the previous night, and had found himself writing a story. The story, entitled 'The Tragedy of the Grand Inquisitor', was a continuation of the narrative of the Grand Inquisitor from Dostoevsky's novel *The Brothers Karamazov*. At the time I was editing a journal, *Temenos Academy Review*, which had been founded by Kathleen Raine; and so, by letter and email, I succeeded with some difficulty in persuading Panikkar to send a copy of his story for publication. It appeared in the journal in an English translation in 2008.¹ I have been

1. Raimundo Panikkar, 'The Tragedy of the Grand Inquisitor', trans. Austen Ivereigh, *TAR* 5 (Autumn 2002) 138–46.

unable to find any mention of this story elsewhere. Nor have I been able to locate the original Spanish text; it survives only in English translation. So it may be that it is otherwise unknown. That would be a pity, because I believe it to be important.

Panikkar's story is extremely cryptic. After summarising Dostoevsky's parable, it follows the Inquisitor himself, who after the departure of Him who is Christ, collapses into his chair in a state of shock. The Inquisitor admits to himself that, despite the cunning arguments he has just used, he has not brought people happiness by depriving them of their freedom. He is due to sign the order for another execution but cannot bring himself to do it. Instead he shuts himself into his room and broods. In a dream he foresees a time when the Church 'no longer sent people to the stake but continued to condemn them in other ways'. In vision, he sees himself in the future, as a Pope who longs to ask forgiveness for the past but is so enmeshed in bureaucracy that he can do nothing to alter the present. Around this Pope are crowds who are not pilgrims but 'tourists and curious passers-by'. 'His churches were empty of true believers; those who surrounded him in the administration [. . .] were motivated by ambition alone and by a faith which lacked both hope and love.'

At last he wakes from his reverie. He goes to confront the man whose death warrant he must sign. The prisoner greets him aggressively so the Inquisitor signs the warrant but he retreats to his room, refusing to attend the execution, and dies soon afterwards, leaving a written document which he has sealed. We are not told what the document contains, apart from a few cryptic phrases—read by an X-ray, because no one dares to open the document itself. The phrases seem to indicate the Inquisitor's doubts and repentance. The document is passed on to the Pope, and disappears with many other things into a repository of unread documents. A scholar, appalled at the document's inaccessibility, manages to find a few notes written by the Inquisitor, which raise further unanswered questions about the role of the church and its relation to God. The scholar requests an audience with the Pope, but before they can meet the Pope dies and the original document is destroyed unread. In due course the scholar too dies, leaving in his will an enigmatic codicil which hovers between condemnation of the church's historical role, and a statement of the need for forgiveness.

Referring to the proverb about the possible mistake of 'throwing the baby out with the bathwater' when engaging in reform, the scholar

writes 'The dirty waters of history (of the Church) are not the living child (of the sacrament). I believe the child is still alive.' He continues,

I do not ask for justice. I ask for forgiveness; that we may forgive and be forgiven. But forgiveness demands repentance. For me, who have never had much power, and who am already at the end of my life, this is easy. I am not in a position to judge.

The story ends, 'The signature is illegible and the date erased.'

Panikkar's story is puzzling and ambiguous. Not being an expert either on theology or on Panikkar's ideas, I cannot tell how to interpret it. But it seems to me that the story contains some of his last reflections, from many different sides, on the church, on Christ, and on history. I believe it deserves to be better known and to be interpreted by those more knowledgeable than I.

Having mentioned Panikkar as the nocturnal creator of fiction, I will digress here to mention a point that has puzzled me greatly. Indeed, if I were asked to point to the passage in Panikkar's writings that has perplexed me the most, I should have to choose one sentence from his essay 'Philosophy as Life-Style' in his book *A Dwelling-Place for Wisdom*. The sentence is this: 'Throughout my life I have hardly dreamed; that is, I can hardly remember any dream.'² I find this profoundly strange.

Most of us can recall childhood nightmares. Many of us can recall from adulthood what Emily Brontë, in *Wuthering Heights*, called 'dreams that have stayed with me ever after, and changed my ideas: they've gone through and through me, like wine through water, and altered the colour of my mind.'³ Dreaming, if only occasionally, is the state in which every one of us can still experience the world of the shaman: to fly, to speak with the dead, to visit other worlds, to encounter animals who bring messages. If Panikkar's statement is true, what can it mean that he seems largely to have lacked this experience? And if his statement is *not* true, why did he want us to think it was the case?

In conclusion, Raimundo Panikkar remains for me a warm and loving presence, an example to aspire to, of someone who followed the true spiritual path to which historical institutions can only point.

2. Raimundo Panikkar, *A Dwelling-Place for Wisdom* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), p. 82.

3. Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, Chapter IX.

Radiating love, a delight in existence and a sense of comedy, looking at the problems of his time from a standpoint of many centuries and perhaps of eternity, he seemed a man who had chosen to live within forms and yet attained a freedom which transcended them. Like all such people he was unique, and his living presence was different from anything that can be found in his writings. It is right and natural that a scholarly edifice should be erected around his work, that translations and commentaries should appear. But for me Panikkar will always, most profoundly, be the softly-robed figure floating silent and weightless on his chairlift up the mountain, and smiling with a radiant childlike delight as the ineffable beauty of the world opened up before him. This is the vision which I would wish to share.

