Christophany: The Fullness of Man

Raimon Panikkar’s Vision for the New Millennium

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As a student of Raimon Panikkar’s Writings I have been fascinated by the way his thinking has been unfolding in the course of the years. More than twenty five years ago, he wrote that he left Europe as a Christian, found himself a Hindu in India and returned a Buddhist, without having ceased to be a Christian. His way of understanding his belonging to a religious tradition is, to say the least, revolutionary. Our efforts to identify who we are result in identification, though this does not exhaust our identity. Identity is at the ontological level, identification at the level of language and logic. Man’s identity is more than his identifications. This key insight is operative in Panikkar’s inauguration of an intercultural and interreligious Christophany.

The expression Christophany, I know, will sound strange both to Christians and to believers of other traditions as well. Christians are familiar with ‘Christology’ – the study of beliefs about Christ. Panikkar believes that this is important but not enough. Christology takes us to the threshold but not to the living room. For this we need to experience the Christ. Panikkar has coined the expression Christophany to stress the experiential aspect of belief in Christ. “Christophany stands for a manifestation of Christ to human consciousness and includes both an experience of Christ and a critical reflection on that experience.”

Panikkar’s book, Christophany: The Fullness of Man, is a constructive critique of Christology the traditional Christian understanding of Jesus Christ. At the same time it is a creative critique of our one-sided understanding of Man as an individual, as an Island, as a male, as merely a human being etc. Christophany is a way to re-live the mystical experience of Jesus Christ; it is “to participate in the same spiritual experience, the same profound intuition that Jesus Christ had”.

Christophany: The Fullness of Man, is about the Mystery known to the Christians as Christ. Those of other faith-traditions might be surprised that Panikkar employs the Christian symbol “Christ”. They will however be relieved to know that Panikkar makes use of it in a very comprehensive and non-sectarian sense. “Christ is the Christian Symbol for the Whole of
“Reality” is the first of his nine Sutras on “Christophany – The Christic Experience”. Panikkar is aware, indeed he states repeatedly that the Greek word Christ cannot be normative for the other faith-traditions because they experience this Mystery differently and therefore have their own name for It.

Because of his intercultural and interreligious preoccupation Panikkar’s primary concern has been neither the historical Jesus nor the Christ as the Christians understand this Mystery. His main interest has never been history because history is not the whole of reality. It is only one aspect of reality. Besides, he is aware of the lopsided development historical consciousness has brought about in the western world. Panikkar is also not speaking primarily of the Christ as Christians understand this Mystery. On the contrary, Panikkar’s complaint is that Christians have appropriated and monopolized the Christ for themselves alone. In fact, Christ is only the Christian approach to, and experience of, the Mystery that is at work in all religions, revelations and movements towards satyam śivam sundaram namely, truth, goodness and beauty.

The Hindus have their own name for this Mystery, Ishwara, the Muslims Allah, the Jews Jahweh, etc. This Mystery as Ishwara, Jahweh, Allah, Christ is experienced differently in different traditions. But Panikkar is quick to correct any false impression that Ishwara, Allah, Jahweh, etc. are mere names and therefore Ishwara is the same as Allah as Jahweh or as Christ. Ishwara, Jahweh, Allah, Christ are according to Panikkar, homeomorphic equivalents or functional equivalents. What function Ishwara has in the faith of the Hindus, Allah has in the faith of the Muslims, Yahweh in the faith of the Jews, Christ has that function in the faith of the Christians. Panikkar is not intending to create a universal religion.

However, right from the beginning Panikkar’s interest has been wholeness or fullness. Christ, for Panikkar, is more than Jesus. Jesus is the Christ but Christ is more than Jesus. No historical reality can exhaust the trans-historical Mystery that is at work in everything, every being and at all times. At the same time it is the Mystery that links us to the absolutely Unspeakable and renders us speechless, on the one hand, and to the Spirit that moves us to speak of the Unspeakable, on the other. This Mystery is always and inevitably connected to the Unspeakable and to the Spirit, the Ātman.

Panikkar views Man on three levels: as an Individual on the level of perceptual experience, as a Person on the level of relationships and as consciousness at the ādhyātmic level. A real understanding of Man cannot be limited to the individual that passes away. Furthermore, Man is a person that is constituted by relationships. “I”, “You”, and “We”, are not optional pronouns. None is possible without the other two. Each presupposes the other two. The three go together.

On a deeper level the Hindu traditions make us aware that ultimately I am not an “I” but a “tvam”, a “you” – tat tvam asī (that thou art)! The “I” of our everyday lives is an illusion, a pseudo-I, an Ahamkāra. The ultimate quest is
to discover that our real identity is connected with the Ātman, the Self, the You of the Absolute. Panikkar reminds us about what we have and who we are. We do not have an “I”; but we are a “You”, the Self of the Absolute.\(^1\)

In sharp contrast to the stress on the historical Jesus in traditional Christologies, Panikkar contends that Christianity is founded not on an historical book but on a personal experience.\(^2\) Jesus came to give life, not to hand down doctrines.\(^3\) It is this life that has to be lived and realized. Its lifeblood is the experience of the Ultimate. The core of *Christophany: The Fullness of Man*, deals with the mystical experience of Jesus.\(^4\) Not so much fidelity to words as to the eternal life that these words embody – that is *Christophany*’s concern. One can concentrate on the individual (historical) Jesus and come to the conclusion that “he is the Way”, or on the person of Jesus and exclaim, “You are the Truth”, or go still deeper into the ādhyātmic level and discover the Christ and realize that “You are the Life.” The third is the mystical experience that we have to appropriate if we wish to experience what Jesus experienced, namely, the reality of the Christ.\(^5\)

It is here that the spiritual task begins, the task of experiencing the “You” that each one of us is. Here Panikkar brings in Jesus who experienced the Unspeakable as “abba”, loving father, the Absolute “I” and himself as the “You”, the Son of the Father who was filled with the Spirit of oneness with the Father, the Spirit of “We”, the Spirit that prompted him to exclaim, “I and the Father are one.”\(^6\) Spirituality for Panikkar consists in becoming aware at the ontological level of our non-duality with the Father in the Spirit.\(^7\) We are non-dually one with the Father. The goal is to realize this.

“I and the Father are one” is a mystical expression.\(^8\) To paraphrase it is an impossible task. It lands us into all kinds of logical difficulties. But being is not subservient to logic. It is beyond any kind of logic. Our phenomenal “I” (Panikkar calls it the “small ego”\(^9\) is, as we said, an illusion, an *Ahamkāra*. I have a “me” but that is not my real “I” because it is not ultimate.

The real I is not identical with the body or the mind or with what one is today, or was yesterday or will be tomorrow. Here one encounters a profound truth: “the experience of contingency wherein we can discover the tangential touch between immanence and transcendence”\(^1\) and realize that we participate in and are an integral part of the very flux that we call reality. “I am the point of the tangent in which those two poles (World and God) meet. I stand in between.”\(^2\)

“… what I am is certainly not identical with what I have. The *me* I have, and with it I have everything else. The *I* I do not have, (that) I am. What I am is neither creature nor creator. I do not know what I am. I know that, although limited, I have already in some way transcended the limits: consciousness that I am finite shows me the infinite. I am neither finite because I know I am such, nor infinite because I am conscious that I am finite.”\(^3\)
When in this context Panikkar asserts, “The I is prior and higher than knowing who or what I am. In brief, I have succeeded in experiencing the ‘me’ as the you of the I,” he is in fact drawing our attention to the different dimensions of Man, dimensions that tend to be overlooked, though they are constitutive. The “me” of our daily lives is really a “you”, which is like a field of the I that cannot be objectified. God cannot be a you. Rather “God is the I, if anything, and ‘I’ the you”, says Panikkar. “Yet, in moments of difficulty, suffering, and testing in my life, I was led spontaneously to invoke You, Father, Divinity – and even more frequently, Christ, my iśādadevatā.”

The real I of our lives, or the I of my “me” is not my I. Rather God or the Ultimate Mystery is the I and I am his you. I and you are neither separate nor one; they stand in an advaitic relationship. The awareness “I am” is not an “I”. It is the “Self”, the “Ātman”. I am the reflection of the Father, the Ātman of Brahman.

This Christ is the mediator between the infinite Brahman and me: it is the Christ who dwells in the deepest center of our being. It is the same Christ that Paul refers to when he confesses, “It is no longer I who live now, but Christ who lives in me!” (Gal 2:20). The you that I am (and not the me) is Christ’s dwelling in the deepest center of my being.

After this preliminary but nonetheless essential reflection, Panikkar proceeds to examine with deep insight three important utterances (mahāvākyāni) of Jesus Christ. He undertakes to do what no Christology has ever dared to do, namely, to interpret them in a manner that could eventually bring one in touch with the mystical experience of Jesus.

The key expressions here are cosmotheandric perichoresis, koinonia, filiation (a human constant), creatio continua, insightfully interpreted by Panikkar as incarnatio continua, and kenosis. Christology is about the Christ (“He is the Son of God”) and what he said and taught. Panikkar’s Christophany is a way to re-live the mystical experience of Jesus Christ; it is to “participate in the same spiritual experience, the same profound intuition that Jesus Christ had.” “You are my Father insofar as you generate me: you are nothing other than being Father” who “engages in no other activity than this: generating.” Panikkar aptly refers to St. Thomas Aquinas, “By the same act through which God generates the Son, he creates the world.”

This fathering, so to say, is the “I” of everything. This “I” (seen inter-culturally also as the Brahman of the Upanishads or the emptiness of Buddhism) brings forth a “You”, the Son, the Christ, in whom - and - through whom we (can) discover our filiation. Panikkar’s brilliant interpretations of crucial texts – Panikkar calls them - mahāvākyāni - (like “Abba, Father!” and “The Father and I are one”) argue persuasively that, like Jesus, we too are really children of this Abba, not just adopted children. Christophany is an ongoing invitation to realize that we are immersed in and belong to the eternal process of the Absolute I “thou-ing” the Son, a process in which the Spirit urges me/us to respond with “Abba, Mother!” The process of
generating is an eternal “thou-ing.” Like Jesus, I too am the “you” of the Father. Here at the ādhyātmic level the I and the you “constitute the two poles of the same reality,” where a nondualistic relation obtains. Unlike Christology, then, Christophany draws attention to the constant summons of the Spirit to realize that “I and the Father are one” but, as Panikkar qualifies, “to the extent that my I disappears, and my I disappears to the extent it allows itself to be shared by whoever comes to me, ‘feeds’ on me.”

Panikkar’s third text, “It is good that I leave”, brings out the truth of the Spirit. Our meditation is within the context of our trinitarian “nature”. As in an Indian raga, we return again and again to the same theme in new and refreshing ways, the theme here being, “This is precisely what the experience of the Trinity is: we know that we are inserted within a cosmotheandric perichoresis.

When Jesus leaves, the Spirit arrives, the Spirit who will guide us to the whole truth. His going away means his presence in a new way. Every being is a Christophany, a manifestation of that presence. But presence does not mean merely historical and temporal presence. The incarnation as the trinitarian vision of creation liberates us from such shackles. Just as creatio is a creatio continua, so too the incarnatio has to be understood as incarnatio continua. Our worth lies in the fact that we are unique participants in the creatio continua or, as Panikkar puts it, the incarnatio continua. And “if I do not desire anything for my ego, I am everything and have everything. I am one with the source insofar as I too act as a source by making everything which I have received flow again - just like Jesus.” Panikkar points to the eucharist, which is a work of the Spirit, and speaks of the resurrection as “the real presence of the absence.” “The I will die and thus make room for the Spirit: this is Life and Resurrection.” Kenosis is the precondition of the resurrection.

The chapters on the Christic experience articulate what follows from the Christophany. The Christ of the Christophany is, for example, the Christ that was, is, and will be at work in the whole of creation, that is, in every single being and not only in Jesus. “Jesus is Christ but Christ cannot be identified completely with Jesus of Nazareth.” “The Incarnation as historical event cannot be considered a universal human fact” and “Christianity too is a cultural construct, inescapably bound to Western history and culture.” Above all, “Christophany is the symbol of the Mysterium Conjunctionis of divine, human and cosmic reality.”

To round up my remarks I would like to highlight the following points for those who are not very familiar with Panikkar’s thought.

One, reality is cosmotheandric. Everything that is, consists of the threefold dynamic of the Cosmic, the Human and the Divine. Every authentic experience is cosmotheandric because authenticity has to do with the wholeness of reality.
Two, lest the name Christ be a stumbling block, Panikkar has repeatedly stated that for him Jesus is the Christ but that the Christ is more than Jesus. With this Panikkar makes room for the fact that other traditions have their own unknown “Christ”, their own experience of the cosmotheandric Mystery for which they have their own name. It should be remembered that with Christ and Christophany Panikkar is not attempting a new kind of evangelization. Panikkar is at home in the Buddhist, Christian, Hindu and secular traditions and has devoted most of his life to building bridges of understanding between religions.

Three, Christophany opens us up to “ecosophy”, to listen to “the wisdom of the earth”, our dwelling-place. Listening is an essential ingredient of Panikkar’s cosmotheandric spirituality. Reason and rational thought are important for Panikkar. But he points out that “reason is not the whole of Logos”, that “Logos is not the whole of Man” and that “Man is not the whole of Being”. There is a dimension beyond reason which is not manipulable but which can be accessible through silence. “Listen to me: be silent and I shall teach you wisdom.” (Job 33:33) This is the depth-dimension of reality which demands openness from us. In consonance with his intercultural approach faith for Panikkar is existential openness.

Four, Christophany warns us not to absolutize history. “The destiny of Man is not just historical existence. It is linked with the life of the Earth and with the fate of reality, the divine not excluded. God or the Gods are again incarnated and share in the destiny of the universe at large. We are all in the same boat, which is not just this planet Earth, but the whole mystery of Life, Consciousness, Existence. Love is the supreme principle – which, again, does not mean that it has been achieved.”

Five, Christophany is the vision wherein Man is more than Man, namely a spark of the Divine. “Our destiny is to become God, to reach the other shore where divinity dwells by means of the transformation that requires a new birth in order to enter the kingdom of heaven...Without plérôma there would be no place for God, and human existence would make no sense. Man is more than Man; when he wants to be merely Man he degenerates into a beast. He is destined for higher things. Whenever he is disquiet, whenever he searches for something, it s because God is already calling him.”

Lastly, Christophany has to do with the cosmotheandric Mystery that unites the cosmic, the divine – human dimensions of reality.

A word about the subtitle of this book, Fullness of Man. Panikkar states: When I refuse to be called ‘a human being’, or when I criticize evolutionistic thought, when I claim to be unique and, to that extent, unclassifiable, I am reacting against the invasion of the scientific mentality which tends to obscure one of the most central of all human experiences: being a unique divine icon of reality; constitutively united with the Source of everything, a microcosm that mirrors the entire macrocosm. In a word, I am one with the Father, infinite, beyond all
comparison and never interchangeable. The I is not me. I am not the product of evolution, a speck of dust, or even mind in the midst of an immense universe. Man, the integrally concrete, real man, is not an item in a classification scheme: it is he who does the classifying.\textsuperscript{54} [My emphasis].

Our age has problems with all three centers of reality: God, World, and Man. Science ignores God; Man does not care for the world; and now the world is fighting back. And our solutions are at best piecemeal, and at worst cosmetic. It is on this background that Christophany, \textit{The Fullness of Man} undertakes a full-scale revision of our understanding of these three centers; this fullness is to be experienced, if at all, at the \textit{ādhyaṭmīc} level. It is a mission statement for the new millennium – a statement that can be understood only when read with the third eye!

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\textsuperscript{1} Panikkar R., \textit{Christophany: The Fullness of Man} (New York: Orbis, 2004). This is a reworking of the Foreword “Fullness of ‘Man’ or Fullness of ‘the Human?’”, I wrote for this book, xi-xvii.
\textsuperscript{3} Christophany, 153-155.
\textsuperscript{4} Ibid., 9-13.
\textsuperscript{5} Ibid., 10.
\textsuperscript{6} Ibid., 101.
\textsuperscript{7} Ibid., 144ff.
\textsuperscript{8} Panikkar, \textit{The Unknown Christ of Hinduism}…In Christophany 12, Panikkar says: “Christophany does not, in principle, exclude a priori any epiphany of the sacred and the divine without, however, neglecting the task of critical discernment.”
\textsuperscript{10} Christophany, 12.
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 10.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 54-74.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 71-74.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 81.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 51.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 116.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 135-140.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 74.
\textsuperscript{19} Joh. 10.30.
\textsuperscript{20} Christophany, 90-106.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 106-120.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 115.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 79.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 79.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 79-81.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 81.
Panikkar offers here - as usual in passing - a profound insight. He says (Christophany, 102), “‘Father’ does not stand only for source, power, and person. It also signifies protection, especially love and therefore Mother.” Later on (Christophany, 103) he comments: “As we have already said, the symbol father also stands for mother, for the woman who gives life, existence, nourishment and love, and signifies sacrifice, sharing, participation in the same adventure and therefore equality.” To this I would add that going through such an experience one would today probably exclaim “Abba, Mother!” Arguably such a Father-Mother function is more Mother than Father!

Christophany, 119.