Interview with Raimon Panikkar
by Carmen Font

Interview with the author and President of the Center for Intercultural Studies, Raimon Panikkar, calling for a new awareness of the limitations of human knowledge in order to make room for the Divine.

Raimon Panikkar, born in Barcelona in 1918 of a Hindu father and a Spanish mother, is doctor in philosophy, chemistry and theology, and has taught in several universities throughout the world: Madrid, Rome, Mysore, Varanasi, Harvard, and Santa Barbara. Author of more than 30 books and 900 articles, among his recent publications are: Invisible Harmony (Fortress, Minneapolis 1995) and La Nuova Innocenza (CENS, Milan 1993, 1994, 1996). President of the Center for Intercultural Studies, VIVARIUM, he acts as a mediator and advocate for an ‘Intrareligious’ dialogue.

Carmen Font: As scientist, philosopher, theologian, Hindu, as an advocate for the dialogue among religions, you will agree with the fact that now humanity finds itself facing a great challenge: to overcome its enormous imbalances between those who eat and those who don’t, between those who seem to live well and those who are claiming change. Is it possible for the present state of things to continue?

Raimon Panikkar: No, of course not. Our present situation can no longer continue in this way, and it will lead us nowhere. And if things don’t change, the alternative is destruction. We are at the end of Kali Yuga. I would say instead of imbalance that there is a situation of injustice which has to be solved, because without justice there can never be peace. Peace is not simply an ideal, it’s a necessity, because the alternative would be a human and planetary catastrophe. Our competitive system, in which only things which can be given a financial value are considered to have any worth, cannot go much further.

CF: Then, in your opinion, what is the best way to overcome these injustices?

RP: It requires a regeneration, a revitalizing of cultures (particularly those so-called ‘Third World’ cultures) which would mean what I call ‘cultural disarmament’. Peace cannot merely be achieved by a military disarmament. It also requires a ‘disarmament’ of the prevailing cultures, the abandonment of the ruts of habitual attitudes in which modern, Western culture has developed. This would also include letting go of or re-assessing traditional,
acquired values, and values we currently consider non-negotiable — like progress, technology, science, democracy and the world economic market. We unthinkingly impose our value-systems as indispensable conditions for establishing a dialogue with other cultures. But don’t forget that, at the same time, 70 per cent live in conditions of utter inferiority and degradation, and, of course, it’s an affront to speak of dialogue if the conditions of equality are absent, if somebody is starving and has been deprived of all human dignity. If we regarded other cultures as equal, we would no longer consider the ‘modern’ criterion as a necessary condition to create lasting peace for humanity.

CF: Through this regeneration, how should we address our political, economic and social affairs so as to achieve equality?

RP: In the first place, it’s important to realize that nowadays there isn’t only one group — political, economic, social or religious — that can solve the problems of the world. A transformation or regeneration of society, of ourselves, of our culture cannot be effected if we attempt to carry it out by ourselves, forgetting the inherent pluralism of mankind.

Many of our present-day problems arise when a group seeks to impose its vision, believing there is only one solution, and that solution is, of course: its solution. This is fundamentalism. There are many kinds and degrees of fundamentalism, some more destructive than others, but the fundamentalism I am referring to is that which is convinced that our ideas are the only real ones and that they are absolute or at least definitive. It is difficult to find someone with a truly open attitude, free from absolutism.

CF: How would this translate into practice, when dealing with issues like development, for instance?

RP: With the question of development, we are doing the same thing, really: we pretend to help that part of the world which we rather patronizingly call the ‘Third World’ with the First World parameters. The North-South question is a substantial part of the problem, not the root. At the root of it there is the imposition of our vision of how development should proceed, what it should be. We have contributed to their undevelopment by implementing our notion of what development is in countries less economically favoured than us. Nations don’t have to develop, according to our understanding of development, but they should be free to realize themselves. That means that our economic system should take people into account, not things. If we impose our idea that the development of a country consists of having a prosperous and competitive economic system, that people from that particular country have cars and lead the same life style that we lead, then we are just imposing our notion of development. They are not undeveloped countries, but countries on their way to self-realization, and we are all included. But, of course, there are pressing problems of lack of food, housing, healthcare and education which have to be solved as soon as possible.
CF: Would that suppose a redistribution of food and resources in general?

RP: Not a redistribution understood as ‘we, the rich countries send food and build our houses in the poor undeveloped countries’, but an equal distribution of these resources in each country. This implies that we have to grow, for instance, crops from that particular country and build houses with native materials. To proceed like this may imply an effort, but it’s not an utopian dream. I think that now we do not eat food but ‘kilometers’! We generally don’t consume what grows in our countries, we import so much from other countries.

There are a number of ways in which we can help these ‘undeveloped’ countries to be self-sufficient, but not by imposing our notion of development; that kind of development normally serves only to enlarge the already saturated markets of the industrialized world. We all know there are strong economic interests which prevent countries from realizing their full potential. The example of foreign debt reflects that which is immoral in our help.

CF: Can organizations like the United Nations and concepts like ‘democracy’ continue to be our best political options?

RP: The UN, instead of an agency of nations, seems an agency of states, which is not the same. They discuss political issues, state issues, which are obviously important for a certain external peace, but which don’t necessarily take into account the interests of the nation, of the people. The UN can and must be much criticized, but at present it’s the only institution we have to maintain international order. It must be transformed from the roots, but not destroyed.

You asked about democracy; I don’t think we can talk about real democracy unless we include the idea of consensus. To accept a decision simply because the majority decides it doesn’t seem to me very natural. Consensus requires a very special technique, and we are still ‘democratically illiterate’. Because of our lack of vision and patience we just take the shortest path. We have to learn to put consensus into practice, first in small communities and then widening the sphere of action. In some communities it exists already.

CF: I would like to proceed with one of your quotes: “When man breaks his connection with Earth, wanting to fulfil himself, he becomes a monster who destroys himself. When man breaks his connection with heaven, wanting to lead himself on his own, he becomes an automaton that destroys others.”

You have said both an external and internal peace are indispensable. Which do you sense is our correct relationship with the earth and ‘heavens’?

RP: It would be both horizontal and vertical at the same time. The individual separate from the others, or from the earth or the divine, does not exist. We, by our very nature, belong both to earth and to the divine. We are conscious and free parts of a whole, but not as puppets that can be easily directed by threads, but rather we find ourselves within a cosmic interweaving or
network. The human being is a person, not an individual. I understand a person as ‘a knot in a net’ of relationships. These threads connect us with our fellow men, the earth and divinity. The more conscious the person is, the more he realizes that his person reaches out to the confines of the world. That is the realized man.

CF: Within this network, how do we learn to move the right threads? Traditionally, religions have served to provide us with points of reference. Nowadays, however, there are many people who reject these religious systems because they no longer fulfil them, realizing at the same time that there is another dimension of reality which we are still not aware of. What’s changing in us?

RP: The realization that no separation exists between ourselves and our reality, and from that emerges a new consciousness, what I call a new innocence. In broad terms, it emerges from the knowledge of our ‘ignorance’, of knowing that our knowledge does not exhaust knowledge, not because we know ignorance, but because we understand our limitations: it is a consciousness born from a conflict of knowledge. Then we overcome knowledge through a leap of faith, confidence, sensitivity, intuition.

Underlying this there would be what I call the Cosmotheandric Principle, in which what is divine, what is human and what is earthly (let everyone find their own terminology) are the three irreducible dimensions which constitute what is real. These three parts are not juxtaposed simply by chance, but they are essentially related and together constitute the Whole. They are parts because they are not the whole, but they are not parts which can be separated from the whole.

CF: How do the great Masters of the different religious traditions come into play here? You will agree with me that there have been great beings who have introduced some profound revelations?

RP: Yes, certainly there have been great beings who have introduced new revelations which have transformed our way of conceiving the world, and if they have impressed us it’s because already in ourselves we made a connection with that which we saw as true. That is to say, we wouldn’t have accepted their revelations or teachings if we did not see it as part of our reality.

Of course, the revelation has been explained by different traditions in a number of ways: God, higher revelation of a divine light, reincarnation, spirit, and so on. Whatever is understood, it’s a fact in history that there have been masters in mankind who have been carriers of wisdom. But the messages are clearly different sometimes, which doesn’t mean they are incompatible or that they are all the same: it would be monotonous. Reality is miscellaneous and always new.

CF: But if the Divine reveals itself, it must have some purpose for doing so?

RP: I wouldn’t be such a dualist or so anthropomorphemic, but I understand we
can speak of a purpose. I don’t think, however, that this plan or purpose is all fixed, as if the world were at the mercy of a purpose since the beginning of time. To think like this would alienate us from reality and allow us to shirk responsibilities. What is needed to solve the many problems of the world is the combined effort of people, with a new consciousness (or a new innocence). We must overcome the age of individualism and ideologies. And we are not alone either, that’s important. The new consciousness that is trying to emerge is the one which realizes that there are certain things which we don’t understand but of which we are a part. Our incomprehension however does not excuse us from taking responsibility. Quite the contrary, we have to assume responsibility as we have never done before. It is a task of solidarity, but it will not be enough. We have to invoke higher help.

SI: Is now the right moment to receive help?

RP: Yes. If there have been divine manifestations before, we cannot assume that they will never again occur. Moreover, the present situation of the world, new in the history of mankind, could be the right time for a new revelation — I don’t know if through Masters who came before or new ones, I don’t think that’s very important. But it might well be that this revelation has not much to do with, or it does not resemble, the ones we have known until now. Reality is always new.

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