

faith and development

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Human Dialogue and Religious Inter–independence

FIRE AND CRYSTAL

By Raimon Panikkar

“I was brought up in the Catholic religion by my Spanish mother, but I have never stopped wanting to join the tolerant and generous religion of my Hindu father and ancestors. And yet, I am not really a cultural or religious ‘half-breed’”. It is with these frank words that Raimon Panikkar replied to the questions of Henri Tincq, in his column in *Le Monde* of April 2, 1996.

Priest, philosopher and theologian, R. Panikkar considers himself *“100% Hindu, 100% Catholic and Spanish.”* He taught for several years in the U.S., went to India only after the age of 36 and has since retired in a little village in Catalonia. So, he is not a religious « half-breed », but a cultural nomad, an instigator of ideas. Nothing can shock him more than a triumphalist strategy in the guise of interreligious dialogue. Nothing irritates him more than a Christian who claims to hold the Truth.

The framework of the article that follows, which is adapted from a conference and translated in a way to maintain its oral style, is organized around the following principle : « To cultivate religious dialogue, the *inter-independence* of all cultures and all men must be recognized, otherwise, there is no human dialogue but only dialectic or armed strife ». A *dialogue* which is in the hands of falsifiers results in terrorism identical to the American version of anti-terrorism, after September 11 2001, with one partner's attitude of domination and contempt and the

other's sentiment of humiliation and frustration. If we want peace, we have to stop talking of interdependence between nations, religions and persons, but rather of inter-independence, which implies the obligation to safeguard the liberty and wholeness of each one.

Interdependence leads to cultural manipulation, to economic pressure, to political imperialism. Its objective is the possession of the other and of his property, the spiritual included, with the basest material motivations. We are exactly in this situation in the Middle-East, each day ready to fall into the fires of an open war. On the other hand, inter-independence demands patient recognition of the other, of his way of perceiving reality , of his way of imagining the world order. Instead of expression based on the will to convince the other, there is a need for willingness to listen, to welcome new ideas and modify our points of view.

There is need for fire and time, to allow the crystal to take shape, says R. Panikkar, who brilliantly masters the art of metaphor. There is need for courage, and, more than courage, tenacity, to obtain the change in mentalities which our society needs to survive and not to be torn apart. But, unlike the crystal, its time is counted. With his words and his experience on the frontiers of cultures, Raimon Panikkar puts us in a state of alert.

Albert Longchamp

Raimon Panikkar is Indian, priest, philosopher and theologian, professor emeritus, University of California (USA). He has written more than 50 books, some of them translated in French. He is now retired and lives in Catalonia (Spain).

In this keynote address, I do not intend to succumb to the temptation to speak in terms of concepts, which is both the greatness and the weakness of Western thought. I will speak, then, in terms of symbols, making it plain immediately that every symbol has numerous different meanings and can therefore be interpreted in several different ways.

The true greatness of a people

The first symbol is September 11. For more than two centuries, now, in a small nation, Catalonia, which is part of the Spanish State, they celebrate, with all kinds of festivities, not a victory but a defeat. The Catalans were defeated by the Bourbons¹, and this humiliation was transformed into a national festival which confers cohesion and a sense of dignity on the people.

Will we have the wisdom to transform the criminal attack of September 11 into a victory which makes us reflect not only on other people's guilt, but also on our own shortcomings? This would be a reaction which would furnish proof of the true greatness of a people and would be the best policy in order to avoid triggering endless acts of violence on one side or the other.

The second symbol is the fire in the crystal, which is the theme of this conference. I would like to congratulate the Pio Manzu Centre on this choice of theme and President Chiampi on his message that referred to the "force of fire in the perfection of the crystal". Fire - Agni, in the Indian tradition - is the father of the Gods: fire is the primordial force that lies in the male seed, in energy, more or less wherever it is to be found, and is the vital force of reality. We talk about the force of fire and the perfection of the crystal, a perfect symbol, but which lacks a third component - time.

For a crystal to come into being, you not only need fire, you also need time, you need to be patient, to respect the rhythms of nature, man and the whole of reality. Isn't perhaps the lack of time one of the main plagues of modern life? A disease which cannot be healed either with haste or by accelerating the pace of events.

The third symbol is the need for time, respect for time, the realisation that time also belongs to reality and is an

essential factor not only for living well but also for living in peace. Will the world be able to respect the rhythms of time before hastening to avenge the recent events which have so outraged everyone? With this introduction, we are not straying off our subject, but rather are entering into the very heart of it: namely, we are all inter-independent.

The original title of this keynote address was not Human dialogue and religious interdependence, but Human dialogue and religious inter-independence. This spontaneous correction by the editors of the conference proceedings constitutes the fourth symbol. We believe that we are interdependent, and indeed it is true that we are not alone and that everything is interrelated, but it is equally true to say that it is the weaker or poorer or less intelligent people who depend on the stronger, richer and more intelligent ones. In Southern India we say that when an ant is tied by a rope to an elephant, it is hardly the elephant that moves in the direction of the ant, but exactly the contrary.

Interdependence makes sense only if it can be inter-independence and this is possible only if we admit a religious factor above all of us, a bond that confers on each and every one of us a measure of freedom that enables us to be independent while remaining bound up with one another.

Religion is not an aspirin

When I say religion, I am not thinking of religion as an aspirin, as a cure for our headaches, of whatever nature they may be. Religion is not an aspirin: either it is the food of life or it is only a palliative remedy. If we consider, the history of the times of the Duke of Modena², to mention but an example, the townspeople and peasants depended on the Duke: that is to say, a regime of dependence held sway which sometimes religion, like an aspirin, attempted to justify or remedy, which explains why many have turned their backs on a certain artificial pseudo - religiosity.

We can be proud of taking a step forward, which, however, I would not call development, because that is an excessively mechanistic, excessively anti-human term. Man does not

develop but grows and matures; we are not machines.

Clearly, we have grown up in a setting which acknowledges interdependence. Democracy, in the strict sense of the term, is a step ahead in acknowledging this interdependence. But if one person possesses atom bombs, a thousand allies or a thousand dollars and another person has only a sword and is alone and poor, interdependence is merely a euphemism. Nicaragua, for instance, dare not go against the United States who are its neighbours. Though recognising interdependence with others, at least theoretically, is admittedly a positive step, we cannot for this reason alone claim to have achieved our goal. Men are equal as numerical entities, but, in actual fact, they are all different - and unique.

This uniqueness is the basis of inter-independence. If we are unique we cannot be reduced to any single common denominator - we are not quantifiable. Inter-independence is the recognition that, from the tiniest elementary particle to the maximum expression of reality, but above all in the human sphere, there exists an inter-independence within a mutual dependence on the universal karma³, on the mystical Body of Christ⁴, on the buddhakâza⁵ and so on. Every being, like every atom, has its own degree of freedom. Every man is not only dependent on the others, on fate or on an objective reality, but is also bound through a relationship of inter-independence with human kind and with the entire cosmos. It is this that constitutes our dignity and is the source of our responsibility. Inter-independence recognises the dimension of freedom of all reality and thus the fact that none of us is an absolute arbiter of anything. We can perhaps manipulate the gene, but we cannot manipulate reality. Even a so-called "divine omnipotence" throws itself into the attack on human freedom.

The recognition of inter-independence clearly implies a new cosmology and even a new vision of the true sense of religion. If religion means opening oneself to the mystery, it follows that no one has a monopoly of that because the mystery is infinite. I cannot believe, then, by virtue of my faith, that only my own truth is valid,

consigning others to the sphere of error or of evil.

Terrorism and anti-terrorism on the same level

If terrorism is an evil, it cannot be combated with bombs. Combating evil with evil leads to no kind of a solution, as Under-secretary Vittorio Sgarbi has already said. At the beginning of this year in India, which has a population greater than that of North America, Europe and Russia put together, and which is struggling against the national plague of terrorism, the President of the Supreme Court has stated that there is something worse than terrorism, namely, anti-terrorism. Terrorism and anti-terrorism are on the same plane inasmuch as, if the latter were on a higher plane, it would not abase itself to fighting with the same weapons as the enemy.

For this reason, a new type of anthropology is needed, as all the speakers who have preceded me have stressed, because, if man is only a well developed monkey, then the law of the jungle applies, and the strongest will carry the day. In that case, however, there will be neither peace nor joy. To put it metaphorically, the Devil, as a fallen angel, is more intelligent and astute than man. To cultivate religious dialogue, the inter-independence of all cultures and all men must be recognised, otherwise there is no human dialogue, but only dialectic or armed strife. This dialogue is much more demanding than annihilating those who think differently from ourselves, though such annihilation is clearly wicked.

Evil belongs to reality, but evil, I repeat, cannot be defeated by a new form of evil. The textbooks in our schools quote a phrase which I do not believe was coined by Niccolò Machiavelli, whom I regard as being too intelligent for such a simple-minded statement which, perhaps precisely for this reason, has captured the popular imagination and unfortunately also that of the politicians: "the end justifies the means". This statement, in addition to being a moral aberration, is a wrong-headed idea: if the end is what justifies the means, that implies that the means are (turn out to be) good if the end is good. This is plainly a straightforward tautology. Means that turn out to be good because they are

justified by a good end serve then to achieve the end that one supposes to be good. If the means depend on the end, there can be no bad means, if the end is good.

Thus it is dependence that makes the means depend on the end. If the end is to defend one's home or fatherland or eliminate terrorism, i.e. a good end, then any means conducive to achieving this end is automatically good. What remains to be seen is whether the means are real means, i.e. if they achieve the end, and thus we have a situation whereby only effective means are justified, which plunges us into the most savage form of pragmatism: "God is on the side of the hardest hitters!"

The great challenge of the third millennium

Interdependence is not a tautology but a vicious circle. If the means are interdependent, everything that refers to the means is related to the ends and vice versa. The ends are good because the means are good and the means are good because the end is good, and are true means when they serve the purpose. Inter-independence is quite different. The means do not depend solely on the end, but also possess a measure of independence in relation to the end, which enables them to be defined as good or bad.

They are therefore not merely means, but have their own autonomy. The independence of inter-independence implies the fact that the fabric of reality is not a rigid grid in which everything is predetermined and mechanical, but a relationship between beings which are not entirely predetermined. This field of freedom is the field of relationship in its deepest sense. The great challenge of this third millennium is that we cannot continue to live and think in terms of the old categories. What is at stake is the destruction of man and nature.

President Gorbachev, in a speech delivered in New York during the "World Forum Millennium 2000" says quite literally: "We still use outdated tools and old-fashioned approaches, ... this is the drama of global politics". Many decades earlier, Einstein had said something similar. This is the challenge of the religious dimension, inherent in every man or woman, whether a

believer or not, because faith is not the legacy only of a few. Beliefs may differ, but faith is a constituent part of the human being.

Every man is open to the unknown, to the mystery, to what he is unfamiliar with, to what he cannot manipulate, to what he believes to be beautiful, and by which he feels attracted, though he is unable to say what it is. We know how to use things but we don't know the mystery of reality; we must be humble. Religion - and I understand perfectly that there is an allergy to the term, considering the uses and abuses that have been perpetrated in its name - is a dimension of man.

True religiosity leads us to listen to others, because no one is self-sufficient. Thus arises the religious dialogue which is an in-depth exchange of man's experience qua human being - and not so much as an expert in any particular specialised field.

Knowing man is to know God

Therefore, many religions (including Islam) tell us that knowing oneself is to know man and that knowing man is to know God. Yet, to achieve knowledge, it is not enough simply to calculate or to see. For the Greek genius the main metaphor is that of sight: seeing, clarifying, revealing. For an ancient civilisation such as the Indian civilisation, on the other hand, the main metaphor is not seeing but hearing. Seeing means judging, that is to say, I, in a certain sense, am the master. If I close my eyes, I can no longer see. Closing one's ears, on the other hand, is not as easy a task and is unquestionably a more artificial exercise.

To know, you also need to be able to listen, which means not judging straight off but being patient and tolerant. Knowing how to listen is an art that can modify our day and age, leading to that major change of mentality that begins in us but ends in our culture and, in others, this change of mentality, or *metanoia*⁶, is neither a technical nor a political problem. Man's profound convictions cannot be changed either by technical manipulation or by political legislation.

The transformation necessary is a religious problem. Hence the importance of inter-religious dialogue which requires the recognition of inter-independence of the entire fabric of reality.

The crystal does not burn in any ordinary fire. You need a high temperature. I would hope my words may succeed in kindling this "fire in the crystal".

Raimon Panikkar
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Notes :

1. 1640 saw a Catalonian uprising against the presence of French troops in the area; after the proclamation of a temporary republic, the insurgents finally pledged allegiance to Louis XIIIth.
2. The dukes of Modena, in Italy, reigned for more than five centuries (1288-1796) in the city of Emilia-Romania.
3. Central dogma of Hinduism which says that man's destiny is determined by past actions in his previous lives.
4. Symbolic union of all Christians (the living and the dead) in the divine person of Christ.
5. Buddhakaza corresponds to the mystical body of reality.
6. Greek word meaning "conversion" or surpassing the mental.

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