

FOREWORD

I first met Raimon Panikkar (or, as I knew him when he lived in Santa Barbara, Raimundo Panikkar) in Varanasi, India, when my family and I were in India for the first time in 1968. I was doing a postdoc at Banaras Hindu University that year. I had spoken with Raimundo by phone earlier in the spring of 1968 before heading out to India with my family, when Raimundo was a visiting professor at Harvard, and I recall that he advised me that it might be better for my family if I were to do my postdoc at Delhi University or in Pune rather than Varanasi (or Banaras) because of health problems that might occur in the sacred city of the Hindus. My wife and I discussed Raimundo's recommendation, but we persisted in pursuing Banaras and BHU. We were fortunate that year, and in subsequent years as well, since Banaras Hindu University regularly provided us with excellent campus accommodations, both when I was a postdoc and later when I was a visiting professor in philosophy at BHU.

In any case, Raimundo maintained a regular residence in Banaras in those years, a small “penthouse” room on the roof of a Śaivite Hindu temple at Hanuman Ghat on the banks of the Ganges. His small rooftop room had a veranda with an exquisite view of the sacred Ganga, and I recall attending Raimundo's multi-cultural discussion group that met once a week on that roof. It

was a remarkable multi-religious experience with participants from around the world (France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Japan, South Korea, Spain, Sri Lanka, the US and various States of India), and I was, and still continue to be amazed, that Raimundo had the unusual capacity to converse, at least with the Europeans and Indians, in their various native tongues (English, French, German, Italian, Hindi, Tamil, and Malayalam). He was able to speak, write and publish in almost all of these European and Indian languages. His famous comment, now almost a cliché, namely, “I started as a Christian, I discovered I was a Hindu and returned as a Buddhist without ceasing to be a Christian,” was in evidence at each evening gathering during that academic year of 1968-69. The intense conversations that took place through those many months have remained with me throughout my own personal career.

So much so that when I joined the faculty in religious studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and became chair of the department in 1970-71, I thought that it would be an excellent idea for the department to get Raimundo Panikkar for our faculty, if it were at all possible, and we were indeed successful in making possible his appointment as professor of religious studies, effective fall quarter, 1971. His was a controversial appointment. Some were persuaded that it was a mistake for the department of religious studies to hire a Roman Catholic priest in a secular, state-funded research university like the University of

California. Others were persuaded that it was a mistake to hire any sort of theologian, regardless of the religious tradition involved, since a secular university must be responsible for maintaining a careful distinction between religion and the state.

I argued, to the contrary, (fortunately, with a majority of others) that the presence of a first-rate intellectual with demonstrable scholarly training, grounded in a particular religious tradition with theological depth as a believer in one tradition but fully capable of engaging other traditions in a critical and sophisticated manner, widely published with an international reputation, and clearly different from conventional American academics, would be the sort of extraordinary appointment that would signal that religious studies at UCSB would be taking a new turn in the academic study of religion. This was also the time in the department's history when we were undertaking the task of developing our incipient graduate program into a first-rate national operation. Panikkar, of course, was only one of many graduate level faculty appointments that the department was able to make in those years, but his was a crucial first step for our new focus on cross-cultural and interdisciplinary work in the study of religion.

His unusual personal background had a great deal to do with his scholarly identity and his intellectual trajectory. Born in Barcelona, Catalonia, Spain in 1918 of an Indian (from Kerala) father and a Spanish Roman Catholic mother, he

spent the first thirty-seven years primarily in Spain, Germany and Italy. In 1946 he was ordained a Roman Catholic priest. He was for some time a member of Opus Dei but later resigned from that order. Later he served in the Diocese of Banaras (in Varanasi, India). He earned three doctoral degrees, in philosophy, chemistry and theology respectively, and, as mentioned above he wrote in many European languages, including Spanish, French, German, Italian and, of course, English. He was also knowledgeable in several Indian languages, Sanskrit (Vedic and Classical), Hindi and Malayalam.

He left Europe for India in 1954 and shortly thereafter decided to remain in India, eventually choosing Indian citizenship. He was intrigued by the world of Hindu and Buddhist spirituality and spent much of the last half of his life relating Hindu and Buddhist meditation with his Catholic contemplative spirituality. He married late in life, and throughout his career he published some fifty books and several hundred scholarly articles.

During his sixteen years at UC Santa Barbara (1971-1987), he taught undergraduate lecture courses and graduate seminars. He was quite popular with undergraduate students who were amazed at his charismatic ability to present Hindu, Buddhist and Christian spirituality in ways that took seriously the rich spirituality in each tradition, stressing comparative cross-cultural insights without losing sight of profound differences between various traditions. On the

graduate level he encouraged rigorous scholarly research with careful attention to texts in their original languages (Latin, Greek, Vedic Sanskrit and Classical Sanskrit, German, French, and so forth). He clearly realized, however, that scholarly precision and immersion in original texts was only the beginning of serious work in religious studies. What really mattered for a doctorate in religious studies was critical insight along with original reflection into the meaning of the spiritual quest in the traditions being interrogated.

Panikkar retired from UC Santa Barbara, becoming professor emeritus in religious studies 1987, and for the remainder of his life took up residence in Tavertet (Osona) in Catalonia where he continued to pursue research and writing until his death in 2010 at the age of 91.

Raimundo Panikkar and I remained good friends during our many years together as colleagues at UC Santa Barbara as well as during the years before and after our time at UC Santa Barbara, and it is a great honor for me to write this Foreword to this remarkable collection of essays.

Professor Michiko Yusa and Professor Young Chan Ro, both former students of Raimundo Panikkar, deserve great credit for co-chairing the all-day seminar on Panikkar's work during the American Academy of Religion meetings in Baltimore, Maryland, in November 2013. Also they were instrumental in putting together a special session at the AAR meetings in the Comparative Studies in Religion

Section, entitled “Raimon Panikkar—Enduring Legacies.” The essays in this collection derive largely from these gatherings.

Gerald James Larson

Tagore Professor Emeritus, Indiana University, Bloomington
Professor Emeritus, Religious Studies, University of California, Santa Barbara