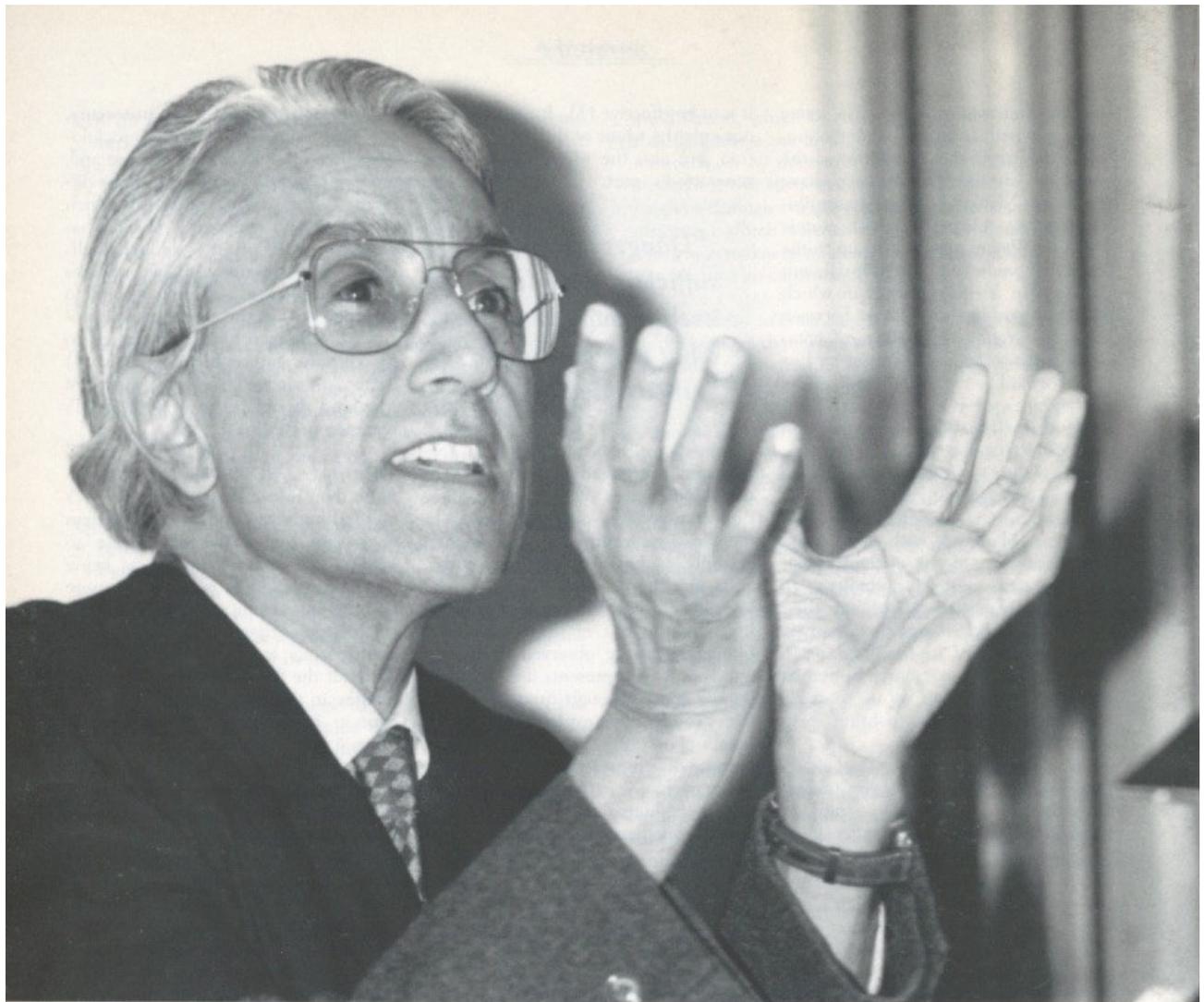


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Making a Bridge to the Unknown

Jane Clark and Alison Yiangou talk to Raimon Panikkar, who delivered this year's Gifford Lectures at Edinburgh University



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It would almost be an understatement to describe Professor Panikkar as a polymath. The author of more than 30 books, he has lived and travelled in India, Europe and the Americas, studying and lecturing on topics ranging from philosophy of science to religion and Indology. He holds

doctorates in chemistry, philosophy and theology; is an ordained Catholic priest, and is now Emeritus Professor of the University of California in Santa Barbara, where for sixteen years before his retirement, he was a professor with tenure teaching Comparative Religion and History of Religions.

Born in Spain in 1918 to an Indian father and a Spanish mother, Professor Panikkar describes himself not as part Indian, part Spanish but wholly Indian and wholly Spanish, and he has spent his life striving for “the harmony of a pluralistic world” by making bridges between the different religious traditions. From his intimate knowledge of Christianity and Hinduism have come *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism* and *Vedic Experience of Mantramajari*: his insights into other traditions have produced *The Silence of God: the Answer of the Buddha*, in which he tackled both Buddhism and “that great post-Christian phenomenon called ‘atheism’”; whilst in books like *The Trinity and the Religious Experience of Man* and *Myth, Faith and Hermeneutics*, he has attempted to distill and illuminate what is essential to all the religious traditions. We spoke to him between lectures in the Gifford series at the George Hotel in Edinburgh.

We would like to start by asking about something you said during a lecture to the Teilhard de Chardin Society (1) just before you came to Edinburgh. You opened the lecture with a quote from Teilhard, which translates roughly as:

“To create or to organise material energy or truth or beauty is an inner torment, which deprives the one who ventures it of the peaceful life – the life of selfishness and attachment. In order to be a good worker of the earth, man must leave behind his tranquillity and repose not only once, but unceasingly he must know how to abandon the first forms of his skill, of his art, of his thoughts, for better ones. To stop and just enjoy them, or possess them, would be a sin against action. Again and again one must transcend oneself, tear oneself away from oneself, and at every instant leave behind one’s most precious first attempts.”

I brought in this quotation because it allowed me to disagree with some of the things Teilhard said. By ‘disagree’, I meant to act in the very spirit that he speaks of. You see, for me, the great Teilhard is the man, the saint and the poet, more than the scientist or the thinker. And I said at the lecture, if we have to follow in his footsteps, we should not be satisfied with just following in his tracks and repeating what he did. We have to be prepared to abandon everything and jump again

and again into the newness of life, the newness of creativity, into the beauty of everything that is new at every moment.

This matter of never resting, but always going on, seems very important to you.

Well, I think that it is essential. Because without that you easily become a fanatic. Or you absolutise. And even if there is an absolute, what that absolute wants is that nobody else should be absolute – so none of us can have a monopoly on absolute truth.

We have to walk a tight-rope. To not fall into fanaticisms and solopsisms and totalitarianism on the one hand, and agnosticisms, relativisms and banality on the other, is, I think, the real religious challenge – or better to say, the human challenge – of our day. That is not to say that we throw away the baby with the bath water. To see that all theisms are inadequate does not mean that I should become a totally materialistic fellow, living only for myself.

You have often spoken of this challenge in terms of there being a new ‘myth’ emerging which effects the whole of humanity. By ‘myth’, I know that you refer to a specific concept which you have developed in great detail in some of your books. Is it possible to borrow a term from science and summarise what you mean by ‘myths’ as the paradigms on which we base our lives?

I would not use the word ‘paradigm’ because of the Platonic resonances. It implies that they are ready-made models. I prefer to speak of myth as the horizon in which we situate our convictions, our visions, all that we see and do. The metaphor of the horizon helps inasmuch as we never reach the horizon; whenever we arrive it is somewhere else. The myth, like the horizon, is never the subject matter of our investigation, but it is that which makes the investigation possible.

There is a tendency nowadays to think that myth is just a subjective thing which has been made obsolete by science. But you say that mythos – which as you have just said is that which we do not question, which remains undefined – must always be considered alongside the intellect, the logos, and vice versa.

Yes. You see, we have the light of reason, and I would not like to diminish the value of that light, that torch. But what makes that torch useful is that it illuminates darkness. You cannot see darkness, and yet, if it were not for the darkness there would be no need of a torch. So it is darkness which makes the looking possible – and the seeing.

So, you are aware that the intellect illuminates something that needs to be illumined, but you can only see *that* something when it is illumined. And the analogy with the myth is, that as you cannot look for darkness with a torch, so you cannot look for myth with the intellect. That darkness which you cannot lay your hands on, except by annihilation, which to enter would mean to disappear – that darkness is the myth, of which we can always be aware only indirectly, or by inference. We are only aware of it once we have left it; then we can say, “Ah, that was”; and this happens through our growth, through our constant loss of innocence which we then recover in a different way. It is this which makes us aware that we cannot stop, we cannot rest, we have to continue all the time.

So if we want to encourage this constant growth, we must stop assuming that what we see and think is the whole truth, and instead try to look at the origin and source of our myth?

Absolutely. And this is why it is important that we do not throw all the spiritual traditions out of the window – but, also, we must be careful not to get stuck in them. We have to continue to grow and develop and learn. But the other thing is that we have to overcome, or resist, the temptation of eclecticism. For me, religion is not a supermarket where you can have a little Zen and a little Yoga, some drops of Christianity, shake well and you have your cocktail. That is not what we need. What we need is to gather some feeling for our own tradition and deepen in that direction.

What signs do you see of this “emerging myth of our times”?

One thing is that I do not believe that the present-day situation allows us to use the usual parameters – social, political, historical – to understand where we are. Politicians like Mrs Thatcher, Mr Gorbachev or President Bush do not give us any clue. They are merely instruments of a much wider situation of which they are exponents.

I am convinced that the strength of my effort (and also at the same time, my weakness) at these lectures and in the other things that I do, is that I try to gather together 8,000 years of human historical experience. Then, I try to encompass that experience of *homo historicus*, historical man, in order to formulate and re-formulate, something which is not just a mish-mash of everything, nor something which follows my own particular line to the detriment of all other ones (that would be at the level of the *logos*, of doctrine, not at the level of the myth), but to arrive at something which makes us more and more aware of, more conformed to, more – not homogeneous but con-genial, co-natural – with that which happens in the entire enclosure of reality.

You feel that there is something about now which is radically different to any other time in human history?

Yes. I think we are facing a turning point. We are facing a mutation, not only in human consciousness but in reality as such. It is appearing here and there in fragmented ways, and I try to bring these fragments a little closer together so as to detect the elements of the incoming myth. What is coming is not a kind of monistic, global thing – you have probably heard me criticising the sort of concepts people come up with, and I do this because they are all at the level of subjective ideas, at the level of the *logos* and not *mythos*. I believe that we are in a very serious moment of the destiny of human kind: not only of the planet, but of the whole of reality. For me, not to be able to see that is a shortcoming.

I like very much what you say about this in your introduction to the Gifford lectures: that our dissatisfaction now with traditional ideas of God “may reflect a corresponding event in Being itself”. It is not that we are inventing these things. What is happening is that we are reacting to a change in reality, and it would seem to follow that what is required is not so much action as response. We have to find a completely new way of being.

Yes. And it seems to me that I detect the signs everywhere. This is why I criticise those who propose small reforms, here and there. That is all right, but the time for reformation is over. We have to face that which you have just said.

What elements are there, do you think, to this new kind of response?

One thing is a deeper trust in ourselves. I meet so many so-called good people who have fallen into a state of not knowing what they should be doing now. So the first thing is a deeper trust in ourselves which is, paradoxically, the essential link to the other side – that of trust in God. One says trust, but it is equally confidence and faith. This requires a much more ‘feminine’ approach – and I use feminine in a metaphorical sense, meaning that we should be opening the eyes and ears, and embracing and loving and accepting. This last is very important, in fact is absolutely essential, as many people are impatient and want change straight away.

The second thing, which is linked, is courage: absolute courage. And courage is the fruit of two things: the first one is this listening, and the second is what the *Gitas* call the renunciation of the fruits of action; the ability to do things not because of the desire to be successful, or to change

the world, or for any kind of result, but to act and to do what is according to that which is appropriate and leave it at that.

Take as an example the question of peace. Everybody wants peace. Not everyone wants to receive peace. We fight for peace: we want to impose our own 'peace' on others, according to our own perceptions of what it is. But the Christian understanding of peace is that we must be able to receive it, we must be able to be 'made peaceful', and then we can pass it on to others. Otherwise, I am the peacemaker through conquest – and it/this will never come about, whether it is in the home, the family, the city or the world.

You have said that throughout the human history, in every culture, there has been a perception that there is more to reality than can be encompassed by the senses and the intellect: that we have a sense of something 'beyond'. This 'beyond' is not a 'thing', neither an entity nor a non-entity, but nevertheless it is accessible to us through a third faculty or organ which you call the 'mystical faculty', or the spirit.

In other words, if we go back to the analogy of the torch and the darkness, we do in fact have the capacity to directly perceive the darkness, but this happens not through the senses or the intellect but through mystical perception.

Yes indeed. And I have made the connection between this faculty and what is called 'the third eye' – and in my lecture I made a reference to something which few people realise, that the 'third eye' is an expression used by Hugh of St Victor, the 14th-century Christian saint.

But I also insist that the moment we try to isolate the mystical 'organ' from the intellect and senses, then we fall into a trap, either hubris or absolutisation – "I see and you don't". What we have to develop now is the three in harmony, and it is in constant trust and confidence in reality. But modern society and the modern concept of man has condemned us to a kind of atrophy in which this third element is simply undeveloped, hardly counts. We must learn to acknowledge it, cultivate it and develop it.

You make a distinction between what you mean by the 'mystical faculty' and the things that many people take as 'mystical' or 'intuitive', like psychological states, visions, or para-psychological phenomena etc.

Yes. What I mean by the mystical is the capability of immediate contemplation of the real: that which is disclosed by it is disclosed by *enosis* (Union). St John of the Cross referred to it as "this

touch which is not of the senses, which is not of the intellect, but is substantial.” The touching point, you see, is a point which does not separate one thing from the other.

The mystical does not claim to reduce everything to rationality, but functions on another level. It transcends reason, and its perceptions are only partially translatable into the images of the mind or the senses. But there is nevertheless an almost universal testimony to it throughout human history. Moses was described by a Pharisee as the ‘seer of the invisible’ – and this, to me, could almost be a historical description of man.

I feel that one of the most important things you have said about this sort of perception is that there is no possibility of gain in it. We cannot build a social order out of it, or use it as a ‘paradigm’ for a new world, because it has no end or aim in the usual sense of the word.

It has no power. It is of another order altogether.

We are so used to using the intellect to solve all our problems that I feel there is a tendency for even the smallest mystical insight to be taken over by it – and the intellect always has an end in view.

Yes indeed, and we have to be aware of this all the time. In its proper place, this causal thinking is a great thing, but out of its sphere it leads to things like “I am meditating in order to be peaceful”.

Whereas if the faculties were in harmony, one would be in a position of ‘being made peaceful’?

Of course. Things are so simple in reality. We complicate them all the time. If we enter into that rhythm, that dance, that vision, then we communicate it by contagion, not by some preconceived scheme which we want to propagate. If something is alive, those who are also alive will resonate with it.

You see, ultimately, these three organs are not really faculties by means of which we come into contact with the Real. Reality is not an object before us, which we open up by special faculties. We exist and live because we exist and live in the Real; we are as much members of that Reality as the Reality we are in contact with. We do not need special organs to open it up. We do not need a special key to enter into that which we already are.

In your eighth lecture here, you ask whether it is possible “to live a religious life, a full human experience, while transcending all theisms?” And you answer, “Yes. Worship persists, but free

from idolatry. Prayer persists, but free from superstitions and being the projection of human frustrations.” Could you say more about what function prayer and worship have?

The very word ‘prayer’, in its etymology, is related to precariousness. So prayer develops our sense of precariousness – our contingency – which is very realistic, very true, perhaps very humiliating if we thought that we could change the world or whatever. Prayer puts us straight and gives us a true sense of proportion. At the same time, it does not discourage, because this is not the kind of humiliation that just pulls us down, but is the rediscovery of our true place and function in the world and in society. Prayer resituates us, and this is why I think it is essential.

What most people understand by prayer is a request for something.

Prayer is more than asking God for some thing, and that is why the real prayer is very often a cry – a spontaneous response to something from which we cannot escape, whether that has to do with ourselves and our own small problems, or whether it is the suffering of the world. Without it, we become inhuman. There are ideals of human perfection which are so above everything, that I don’t know what one would become – an angel or a callous fellow, certainly not a human being. They assume that everything has already been transcended, but that is not the case.

So prayer situates us in the real place where we are. And we are, I think I can say, still struggling. I may reach a state where I have no personal problems, except perhaps to face death, but I would not be so unintelligent, or so callous, that I would not still share and participate in all the struggles and pangs of birth of the entire reality. And then, prayer is of that kind of order.

And how do you see worship?

Worship is the ultimate outlet to say – and I use the word in its deepest sense – that which otherwise cannot be said. It expresses, embodies, manifests, reveals, that which the human language cannot convey. Worship is participation in a more intentional way in the reality of Being. That is why without this worshipful attitude we fall into two-dimensional relationships, and we forget about the third dimension, which does not allow itself to be spoken about, but which you have to speak to or speak with. The worshipful act need not be defined: it is whatever way you share in this reality. It could be a Catholic Mass, a Sufi dance, a mosque prayer or a silent meditation, or whatever.

One of the things which has interested me about worship is this: I have said, as a challenge to modern philosophy, that you cannot have a hermeneutic of worship; in other words, you cannot

interpret it in the usual way. There are things that, the moment you try to explain them, go away; they are vulnerable, and this makes it easy for something like religion to become superstition, with the priesthood exploiting the people, etc. – which is something I would not like to foster.

Nevertheless, there is something upon which we cannot lay our hands – or our intellect – without destroying it. That is why, in all the religious traditions, only the faithful are allowed to participate in the worship. This is a delicate matter, because of the dangers of fanaticism: but there is something very deep here. You see, this sharing, this participation which is worship, is at the level of the myth; you cannot be an observer there, because all that one can ‘see’ is not the real thing.

You have invented, I believe, a whole new concept, the ‘pistema’, to tackle this problem.

Edmund Husserl, the founder of phenomenology, invented the term *noema* (from the Greek *nous* meaning mind) which is the pure concept, the pure notion of awareness of any situation which one has without judging whether it is true or not true, whether one likes or dislikes it. *Noema* describes an intellectual object in all its purity, and it allows one to describe the thing sufficiently clearly and purely to engage in a meaningful discourse.

From this has sprung that extraordinary branch of modern philosophy called phenomenology. Now, the historians and the theologians have tried to apply this same concept to religious phenomena; and I have tried to make my voice heard – in fact to shout – that this is wrong. It is simply imitating something which does not belong to our sphere of study, because the religious object is essentially different from the secular subject. The worship of the believer belongs essentially to belief; so if I do not share in this belief, how can I describe it? It is inevitable that even videos or tape-recordings of religious ceremonies will only be a translation into secular consciousness of what I have seen.

Religious phenomenology needs not the *noema* but the *pistema* – from *pistis*, the Greek word for faith – which is the capacity for describing a belief in its own terms. In other words, in order to understand your belief, I need to enter into it if I somewhat share in it. This does not mean that I necessarily bow to superstition, but that I recognise that I cannot understand these things from the outside. This implies a totally new method.

Or even, a completely different way of knowing. This is something which is spoken of in many of the mystical traditions. Ibn ‘Arabī for instance talks about the possibility of becoming the ‘hayula’ (the substance or the kernel) of all the beliefs. This is not a question of becoming a bit of this and a bit of that, but of direct participation in the interior meaning of beliefs.

One may not be able to participate in all the belief systems, but one can have an entrance. Just as I cannot speak two languages at the same time, but I am able to speak any number of languages one after another.

But what you say touches on something which is very dear to me, which is the distinction – which I have elaborated in my book, *Myth, Faith and Hermeneutics* – between faith and belief. Faith is essentially different from belief. Faith to me is a constitutive human dimension. Faith belongs to Man, like reason belongs to Man; therefore every human being has faith. Faith is an openness to transcendence, and it is that which in every human being is open to more, to better, to different, to the future, which are very simple ways of saying transcendence.

Now, we crystallise that faith, we articulate it, into systems of belief – and the systems are not the same. Arjuna is not the same as Avinagupta, Avinagupta is not Thomas Aquinas, Thomas Aquinas is not Karl Marx. The systems which they articulate are incompatible *qua* systems of belief. But the spiritual man, like Ibn ‘Arabi or St Paul, has developed the awareness of what I call naked faith, which allows them, with the necessary discipline, to understand the meaning of other beliefs at the level of mythology, and so to eventually criticise.

And to see the limitations perhaps, because it is said that such a man will see that each belief system is right, and each is a blessed way, but that it has limitations.

Yes. To be able to undertake a critique in this way may actually help that particular way to progress, to grow. And this is important, because the whole of life is in this sort of constant movement.

It seems to me that the essence, or the substance, of worship is, in the end, the love of God. Would you agree that the criteria of being able to enter into another’s faith is the recognition of that?

Now you have said the word which I have always tried to avoid because there are so many meanings to it, but which nevertheless is *the* word, which is love. When you link worship with love, I say “obviously”, because if you don’t love, then you do not see the same thing. If you are in love with somebody, and you describe them to someone else, then it usually leaves them cold. Worship is about that which, if you see it, then you know that we are all in love with it. The different forms of worship are the expressions; some people resonate with one way, some with another.

It is only through this sort of perception, I think, that real tolerance can arise. And it explains why it is that the more one understands one's own way – in the sense of directing oneself towards its essential meaning – the more one understands and tolerates other people's ways.

The thing is, that people have to understand that in following any tradition, whether it be Kabbalah, Zen or any of the rest, they have to accept that it involves both acceptance and transformation. You cannot be a true traditionalist if you do not transform your own tradition. This transformation takes many different paths, but basically it starts with us.

There have been enormous changes in all the religions in recent years. Within Christianity, people are talking about things which would have been considered madness even 20 years ago. If we do not see this, then we must be blind. It is all part of the same process which I have been talking about. My effort is directed towards formulating, and crystallising and living, these new things – to try to signal these fragments of a not-yet-new story or myth.

(1) *London, April 21st, 1989*

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