

Eureka Street - AUSTRALIA

## Man of faiths

Peter Kirkwood September 01, 2010

Last Thursday, at 4.15pm local time, in the beautiful village of Tavertet in the north of Spain, a great man died. Other theological luminaries have called him 'a pioneer of inter-religious dialogue', 'one of the world's most important philosophers of religion', 'a true spiritual giant of our times'. While the man himself eschewed such epithets, and such descriptions of holy men are often exaggerations, in his case they are patently true.

Raimon Panikkar was born on 3rd November, 1918 into a family of mixed race and religion. His mother was Catholic, from Catalonia, the north-east region of Spain, where he grew up, and his father was Indian Hindu from Kerala in the south of the subcontinent.

It was not only his mixed ethnic and religious background which prepared him for his profound inter-religious journey. He had a formidable intellect and was a polymath. He gained three doctorates: the first in philosophy (1946); the second in science, in chemistry (1958); and the third in theology (1961), with his doctoral thesis becoming his first well known book entitled *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*. He spoke some dozen languages, and wrote his many books (around 60 titles) and articles in six of them: in Catalan, Spanish, French, German, Italian and English.

In 1955, as a young Catholic priest, Panikkar went to live in India, not as a missionary, but as a pioneer in the wave of Western Christian academics who went to study Eastern religious traditions. He lived and worked in a number of centres in India, including its holiest city, Varanasi. There he lived at Hanumanghat right on the banks of the Ganges, where his house overlooked the riverside terraces that are used for cremations, and the sacred river itself.

He mastered Sanskrit and Pali, the ancient languages of Hindu and Buddhist scriptures. He embarked on a huge work of commentary and translation of the oldest and most central of these, the Vedas, a task that took ten years. It resulted in an acclaimed book of 1000 pages, highly regarded even by Hindu scholars, called *Mantramanjari: The Vedic Experience*.

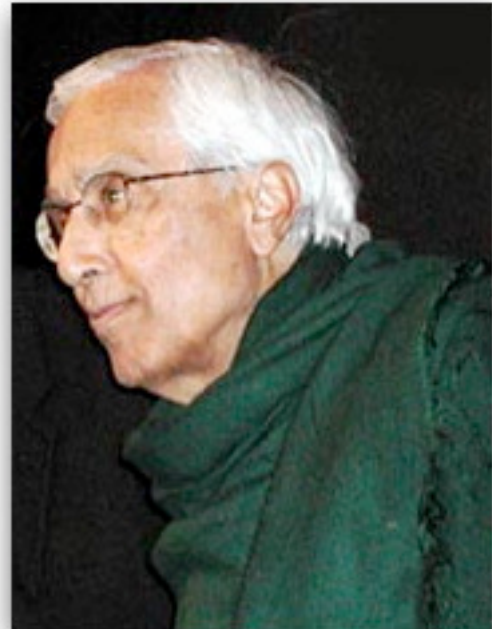
In 1967 he was invited to become Professor of Comparative Theology at the prestigious Harvard University in the USA, and he taught there till 1972. He then moved to the University of California at Santa Barbara where he remained till 1987. During this period, he frequently visited India, and was in demand as guest lecturer at universities in the UK, Europe and Latin America. In 1987, on his retirement, he returned to live in Spain, in Tavertet in the mountains outside Barcelona.

His journey amongst the great world religions was not just an academic exercise. It profoundly affected, and, in turn, was guided by his personal beliefs and spirituality. He may have had the head of a rigorous scholar, but at heart he was a mystic and contemplative. In him, these two modes of being and experiencing the world merged into a harmonious and productive unity.

On his return to Europe after many years absence, when asked about his faith pilgrimage, he answered with this now famous and often quoted reply, 'I left as a Christian, I found myself a Hindu, and I return a Buddhist, without having ceased to be a Christian.' This statement of his own multiple religious belonging is just one of many challenging insights and ideas that he wrote about with passion and eloquence.

Perhaps his three best known books that express his core theology are *The Intra-Religious Dialogue* (1978), *Myth, Faith and Hermeneutics: Cross-Cultural Studies* (1979) and *The Cosmotheandric Experience: Emerging Religious Consciousness* (1993). Together they describe the emerging pluralistic world in which we live, and provide a cogent framework for dealing with it in a productive way.

A good summary of the significance of Panikkar comes from the late American theologian Ewert Cousins. He argued we are in a period of deep change in religion, and used the term 'mutation' in history to refer to times when there is a quantum leap



forward. He saw the era of globalisation since World War II as bringing about such a mutation into a 'global matrix of cultures'. He saw Panikkar as being at the forefront of this transformation, that he was already living in this new future.

Among those who have made the transition, some become mediators of the future for the others who can make the passage. These mutational men may return from the future to draw others from the past across the abyss of the present and into the mutational world of the future. I suggest that Panikkar is such a 'mutational man', one in whom the global mutation has already occurred and in whom the new forms of consciousness have been concretised.

I had the privilege to meet Panikkar three times in his latter years. The final occasion was in 2008 when I made a [documentary](#) for ABC TV's *Compass* that followed Aboriginal elder, Joan Hendriks as she attended an inter-religious conference in Venice marking his ninetieth birthday. The film portrays him at home in Tavertet, gives a flavour of what he was like as a person, and shows how he was revered by those who knew and loved him.

Though frail and in his nineties, Raimon Panikkar worked right till the end. His last book, *The Rhythm of Being*, an updated version of his acclaimed Gifford Lectures that he delivered in 1989, was published just weeks ago. His funeral will take place on Friday, 3rd September, at the Benedictine Abbey of Montserrat in the mountains west of Barcelona near his final much loved home in Tavertet.