

NEW YORK TIMES --5 Sept.

Raimon Panikkar, Catholic Theologian, Is Dead at 91

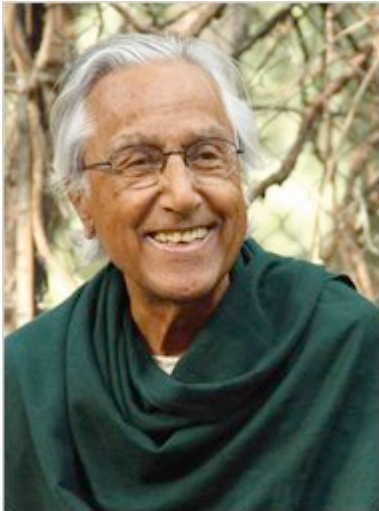
By [WILLIAM GRIMES](#)

Published: September 4, 2010



Raimon Panikkar, a Roman Catholic theologian whose embrace of Hindu scriptures and Buddhism made him an influential voice for promoting dialogue among the world's religions, died on Aug. 26 at his home in Tavertet, Spain. He was 91.

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Ivivo Gallo

Raimon Panikkar.

His death was announced on his Web site, raimon-panikkar.org.

Mr. Panikkar was a Roman Catholic priest and a professor of philosophy at the University of Madrid when he made his first trip to India in 1954. It was a turning point

in his spiritual life and a homecoming of sorts: his father was a Hindu from the south of India who had married a Spanish Roman Catholic.

While studying Indian philosophy and religion at the University of Mysore and Banaras Hindu University, Mr. Panikkar befriended several Western monks seeking Eastern forms for the expression of their Christian beliefs. It was an eye-opening experience.

“I left Europe as a Christian, I discovered I was a Hindu and returned as a Buddhist without ever having ceased to be Christian,” he later wrote.

The rest of his life was dedicated to promoting, as a university teacher and in dozens of books, an expansion of the Judaic and Greco-Roman foundations of Christianity to embrace the insights of non-Western religions.

“He was one of the pioneers in opening up Christianity to other religions and learning from them,” [Joseph Prabhu](#), a professor of philosophy at [California State University](#), Los Angeles, and the editor of [“The Intercultural Challenge of Raimon Panikkar”](#) (1996), said in a telephone interview on Wednesday. “We can see the new waves of Christianity moving toward the non-European world in the 21st century, and he prepared the ground for an authentic dialogue between Christianity and other faiths, and beyond that for the cross-cultural conversation which marks our globalized world.”

Raimundo Panikkar Alemany was born on Nov. 3, 1918, in Barcelona, where his father, after living in Britain, had opened a chemical plant. After attending a Jesuit secondary school, he began studying philosophy in Barcelona.

When the Spanish Civil War broke out, he fled to Bonn to continue his university studies, but while he was on vacation at home, Germany invaded Poland. He remained in Spain, earning a doctorate in philosophy at the University of Madrid in 1946 and a doctorate in chemistry in 1958.

In 1940 he had become friends with [Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer](#), the canonized founder of Opus Dei, a conservative Catholic movement of clerics and laity; Father Escrivá urged him to train for the priesthood. He was ordained in 1946 and for the next 20 years worked closely with Opus Dei. He earned a third doctorate, in theology, at the Lateran University in Rome in 1961.

In his dissertation, Mr. Panikkar analyzed St. Thomas Aquinas’s interpretation of the Brahma Sutras, one of Hinduism’s fundamental texts, comparing it to the interpretation of the eighth-century Hindu philosopher Adi Sankara. He argued that Christ, as a universal symbol of the divine and the human intertwined, belonged to the world, not just to Christianity, and could be found under other names in other religions. His dissertation was later published as [“The Unknown Christ of Hinduism”](#) (1981).

In his later work, he tried to recast Christianity as a nontriumphal faith and to combat what he called “tribal Christology.” Christianity, he argued, was not intended to be an invasion force bent on conquering other gods and, in the colonial period, other peoples.

Mr. Panikkar became a visiting professor at Harvard Divinity School in 1966 and a professor of religious studies at the [University of California, Santa Barbara](#), in 1972. For many years he taught in the spring and spent the rest of the year doing research in India.

In 1987 he moved to Tavertet, in the hills north of Barcelona, where he founded the Raimon Panikkar Vivarium Foundation, a center for intercultural studies.

A year later he was invited to deliver the Gifford Lectures, joining a list of philosophers and writers that has included William James, Alfred North Whitehead and [Iris Murdoch](#). His lectures, on the concept he called “the cosmotheandric experience,” or the interplay between the divine, the human and the cosmic, were published in revised form in 2009 as “The Rhythm of Being.”

His many books include “The Trinity and the Religious Experience of Man” (1973), “The Cosmotheandric Experience: Emerging Religious Consciousness” (1993), “Christophany: The Fullness of Man” (2004) and “The Experience of God: Icons of the Mystery” (2006).

He is survived by a brother, the Spanish philosopher and journalist Salvador Pániker, and a sister, Mercedes, both of Barcelona.

“The whole history of Christianity is one of enrichment and renewal brought about by elements that came from outside itself,” Mr. Panikkar told [The Christian Century](#) in 2000, adding, “If the church wishes to live, it should not be afraid of assimilating elements that come from other religious traditions, whose existence it can today no longer ignore.”

A version of this article appeared in print on September 5, 2010, on page A20 of the New York edition.