



Understanding Advaita: A Panikkarean Perspective for a Cross-Cultural Journey

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Abstract

In a world of fragmented approach and without a holistic vision, an integrated view is called for to save the human community, and at large, the universe from many perils. One such integrated outlook germinates in Raimon Panikkar's understanding of the most cherished Indian philosophical concept of *advaita*. His understanding of *advaita* sees reality in diversified manner and still with an undifferentiated unity. He highlights that the entities should be seen in their polarities and not in-themselves. This perspective leads to the felt need for a cross-cultural journey which is an indispensable one, in the current scenario of a pluralistic phenomenon and the availability of many options. Still, elaborating on the cross-cultural odyssey is not the objective here and therefore such an exposition does not have space here. The emphasis of this paper lies on the exposition of the drive that pushes us for the cross-cultural approach, creating awareness that we can no more be isolated within an enclosure.

Keywords: *Advaita*, monism, dualism, pluralism, cosmotheandric vision

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1. Introduction

“The world is perhaps no longer in the arms of Greek *moira*, or the Indian *karma*, or in the hands of the Abrahamic *providence*. The world nowadays appears to be in *our* hands, and it seems to be in rather worse shape than in those days when we could at least curse the fates, charge destiny, or dispute like Job with his God as to whether or not he had acted justly. We no longer have anyone to blame for our woes but ourselves” (Panikkar, 1979b, p.202). These insightful words of Raimon Panikkar call to us for a greater realization. The specialized, segmented approach has made our existence into pieces and at last peace-less. In such a context of our fragmented outlook of reality, a holistic pathway is the road to a healthier life.

One such curative pathway is vehemently echoed by Raimon Panikkar, a prolific writer and mystic, who is well known as the bridge builder among religions and cultures, is one of the pioneers of inter-religious dialogue (Amaladass, pp.386-400). His cross-cultural journey has contributed to a new perception in religious studies. Although he had his early upbringing in a strict Christian Catholic background; these years also opened Panikkar’s mind to the mystic traditions of India which eventually led to his doctorate in 1961. His research was later published as *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism* in 1964. He was fascinated by the concept of *Advaita*. Even his perspectives on Christian Trinity began to take a turn when he started to view them through the glass of *Advaita*. His viewpoint on pluralism also differs from that which is commonly held due to the penetration of *Advaitic* rays into it. Though Panikkar takes his inspiration from the Vedas and its commentaries, his understanding of *Advaita* differs radically from its traditional outlook. Traditionally, *advaita* means non-duality, which in the Indian philosophy means the conception of viewing, *Brahman* and the world (two entities) as non-dual but identical. In comparison to this understanding, Panikkar’s interpretation of *advaita* differs. His interpretation says that any two entities viewed with *advaitic* perspective means that they are so related to each other that they are inseparable wherein each one’s identity is maintained. Given this understanding, this article attempts to place the *advaitic* intuition as the basic intuition for the varied

perspectives that flow out in the contributions of Panikkar. First, we shall enter into the elaboration of this shifted understanding in Panikkar and explore how it is reflected in his pluralistic understanding and his cosmotheandric vision of reality, thereby emphasizing the need for a cross-cultural endeavour.

2. Traditional View on *Advaita*

The word *advaita* has its origin in the Indian philosophy. The starting point of the Indian speculation is *atman*, the self. The priority of the speculation was on *atman*, not *Brahman*. In other words, the priority of the human mind did not rest with the problem of *Brahman*. While in the process of reflecting upon the *self*, the Indian philosophy was led to ponder on the problem of *Brahman* (Panikkar, 1981, p.109). In such an endeavour, the school of Vedanta takes prominence in centrally pondering on *Brahman* identifying the same with *atman*. *Prasthanatraya*, i.e. the three basic scriptures, namely, the *Brahma Sutras*, the *Bhagavad Gita*, and the *Upanisads* form the basic scriptures of the Vedanta school. There have been many works of literature by many luminaries based on these scriptures which are not available. But the earliest available is, one from Gaudapada, who initiated the *advaitic* or non-dualistic view based on these scriptures. After him came Sankaracharya who took pains to spread the same view in 8th century AD (Sunirmalananda, pp.16-17, p. 60). Through him, *advaita* perspective of the Vedanta school began to be popular till now. The history of the Advaita Vedanta School is of importance here to weigh its gravity against the shift in perspective Panikkar takes. Advaita Vedanta presents the absolutistic view of *Brahman* as an impersonal principle and regards all diversity as being an illusion. Whereas the other schools in Vedanta present the theistic view in contrast to the absolutistic view (Hiriyanna, p. 152, p. 155).

In Sankaracharya's exposition of *advaita*, the following traditional view flows. Etymologically speaking, the word *advaita* is derived from the Sanskrit root *dv*, which means 'two'. The letter *a* which is prefixed to the word *dvaita* means 'not'. Therefore, this word *advaita* means 'not two'. This word is applied in conceiving reality as *not two* but *one*. It brings in the monistic view of reality, i.e.

reality is one. In this sense, it is a metaphysical concept. *Advaita* certainly is not dualism. Hence, it interprets the ultimate experience in terms of non-duality as the essential non-separability of the Self (*atman*) and God (*brahman*) (Panikkar, 1979a, p.288). It means that the reality is one, i.e. there is only one reality Brahman. The world we perceive is not another reality but only illusory in relation to the overwhelming reality of Brahman. To put it in another form, only Brahman exists and the phenomenal world manifests itself to be a superimposition upon Brahman. Cousins expresses this conception in a focussed manner in the following words: “if one begins with the differentiated multiplicity of the phenomenal world, with an advaitic intuition, one can grasp Brahman as the substratum of the phenomenal world – the undifferentiated ground beyond all multiplicity and differentiation.... the advaitic position can be called a monism, because, in effect, it reduces plurality to an undifferentiated unity” (Cousins, p.120).

3. Panikkar’s View on *Advaita*

Panikkar differs from this monistic viewing of *advaita*. This means, he radically differs in the metaphysical understanding of the term *advaita* found in the Indian traditional philosophical conception. The difference lies in his perspective, of the ramification of the etymological meaning of the word *advaita*, which simply means ‘not two’. Panikkar draws a parallel to *advaita* with “aduality” or “adualism”. The prefix *a* which means “not” does not connote a dialectical negation, rather, here the *a* is a primitive prefix pointing to an ‘absence of duality’. For example, the word ‘A-rational’ cannot be necessarily equated with ‘irrational’ (non-rational), but rather it indicates something outside the rational order (Panikkar, 2010, p. 216). Similarly *a-dvaita* cannot be necessarily equated with ‘non-duality’, but it indicates something outside the dualistic framework.

Panikkar draws insight from *pratityasumutpada* of Buddhism, that is, the radical relativity or dependent origination to understand the constitutive relationships that inhabit in the reality. This awareness is an important ingredient of the *advaitic* intuition. This is

important to have a holistic picture of reality beyond our discursive reason. Here we should be cautious of the word *intellect* which Panikkar employs to differentiate from *reason* or discursive reason. Panikkar uses the word *intellect*, equating it with *awareness* or *spiritual knowledge*, which stems from a spiritual experience, or in other words, from the third eye view. Every element in reality is not a thing but a pole. A thing is not thing-in-itself rather it is a pole. Pole is a view that emerges when things are seen in relation. If the picture of relation becomes blind, then the pole would appear only as a thing-in-itself. The tendency of *reason* is to discover the relation of one thing with another, eventually failing to see the constitutive relationships that make the things dependent on each other. It sees the things *in themselves*, in their own consistency (substance). Rather, the *intellect* sees the object as lacking something without its constitutive links and sees the relation as relation and the poles subsidiarily (Panikkar, 2010, pp.218-219).

Reason or our analytical thinking introduces harmful dichotomies in the perception of reality by affirming one and excluding the other; thereby losing sight of the constitutive relationships that inhabit reality. Any relation needs at least two poles; but it is not strictly two either, since there are not two relations. It is only one relation between the poles. This constitutive relationship is the intuition that is brought out by Panikkar's view of *advaita*. It is neither one (it needs the poles) nor two (it is not two relations), but a-dual (Panikkar, 2010, pp.218-219). Panikkar reflectively writes, "Being is not a lifeless monolithic unity. The *tad ekam*, 'that One' of the Upanishad, is *ekam evadvitiam*, 'one only without a second,' or literally, 'one only non-duality.' This non-dual-One or One-non-duality does not, as it were, exclude any being and does not suffocate Being in the embrace of the One. Only a second 'One' would destroy the first. It has not a 'second One' because that selfsame One is itself *advitiam*, adual" (Panikkar, 2010, p.226). In such a discourse, Panikkar denies the reduction of *advaitic* understanding to a monistic view and also the dualistic perception of reality.

From the logical and rational points of view too, Panikkar embarks on the monistic and dualistic standpoints to bring to light its

incompatibility metaphysically. Based on monistic view, to say that "Reality is One" is an intelligible sentence. Hence, monism is logically intelligible. Further, the monistic sentence can shift from the logical order (of a formal sentence) to a metaphysical sentence assuming that the "one" reality is intelligible, which amounts to the idealistic postulate (Panikkar, 2010, p.217). But here it is only idealistic and not realistic. Therefore, it shows its incompatibility with realistic arguments. Rather, based on dualistic view, to say that "Reality is two", is also a logically intelligible sentence. However, the dualistic sentence cannot be shifted from the logical (formal) order to the metaphysical without contradicting itself. It is because "two" is an intelligible concept, but not an intelligible "thing". It means that "Two" may refer to two intelligible things. In that case, the two intelligible substances are linked by a third factor, our intellect, which introduces a hierarchy within dualism that makes the non-intellect part subordinated to the intellect one, thereby making dualism as relative dualism and hence, dualism destroyed (Panikkar, 2010, p.217). Both "reality is one" and "reality is two" are denied by *Advaita* precisely because it discovers *being* non-reducible to *thinking*. As earlier stated, reason fails to grasp the constitutive relationship that dwells in the reality. A wider exposition of this point is needed further.

4. Thinking-Being Correspondence: Disputed

There is a metaphysical assumption of the intimate correspondence between *thinking* and *being*. This assumption of correspondence is not an outcome of pure modern science but of unscientific extrapolation attempted by some scientific cosmologists (Panikkar, 2010, p.220). This assumption has existed since the presocratic times, especially in the thoughts of Parmenides. Although Panikkar has cherished this metaphysical insight the most, he begins to dispute the same in his reflections (Panikkar, 1979b, p.204). The intellect - not reason - transcends this correspondence by being directly aware of relationships between poles, without observing the poles as entity-in-themselves. It is the fruit of the special kind of awareness - spiritual experience - belonging to the third eye. The *thinking-being* correspondence would only yield a partial, deviated picture of reality. The reason for this trust in such

a correspondence is the assumption that “nature was written in mathematical language” (Panikkar, 2010, p.219). Any ontological affirmations about reality were assumed to be right if it passes the logical order. Metaphysical statements were considered to be truthful, based on the validity of the logical language. In addition to this trust, the success of science had also tended to make us believe that it discloses the reality of things. Due to these positive claims here and there, rationality is considered to be the ultimate criterion of reality. But Panikkar implores that we need to become aware that the field of spiritual experience (intellect) is larger than rationality, and it cannot be the ultimate criterion in manifesting the real of the reality (Panikkar, 2010, p.220). As per the conviction of Panikkar, between thinking and being, the being is bigger (Panikkar, 2010, p.218). This means that the laws of being become the laws of thought based on which science progresses, but this need not be vice-versa.

Panikkar does not downplay the role of *reason*. It has value in its proper place. But he only points out that *reason* rests in dialectic, whereas *intellect* transcends that. Dialectics affirms one at the cost of negating the other, and this does not belong to the dynamics of the intellect. This is the dynamism of *advaita*. Panikkar states, “*Advaita* is not a formal statement that can claim rational evidence; it is a metaphysical insight that claims to be illumined (justified) by the light of consciousness emerging from a spiritual experience of an ontological character” (Panikkar, 2010, p.220). Further, “*Advaita* denies the absolute identification of knowing (thinking) with Being not because the intellect is weak, but because reality is stronger” (Panikkar, 2010, p.218). In other words, “adualism asserts that Being is irreducible to *cit*, *intelligere*, *percipi*, or intelligibility in whatever form” (Panikkar, 2010, p.218). The intimate correspondence between *thinking* and *being* happens in the human mind through the application of the reductionistic method which is a mistaken way to conceive the reality that is filled with diversity, variety, and constitutive relationships. As a corrective, Panikkar suggests for the overcoming of threefold reductionism: “reason is not the whole of Logos”, “Logos is not the whole of Man”, and “Man is not the whole of Being” (Panikkar, 1979b, pp.214-216). Therefore, the final call is: Reason cannot exhaust the whole of being. In other words, “the real is not reducible to

intelligibility" (Panikkar, 2010, p.217). The grand scale of the vast reality cannot be brought under intelligibility for a fuller comprehension. The *advaitic* intuition alone serves as the tool to accept this. The *advaitic* perspective links us further to dwell upon pluralism which is pertinent to a broader picture of reality.

5. A New Look at Pluralism

Pluralism can be seen from different platforms, say for example, sociological, economic, religious, artistic, etc. But Panikkar points out that pluralism has classically been considered a metaphysical concept that raises certain questions about reality. This focus being basic from metaphysics than any other is convincing too. But given our concrete day-to-day confusions accelerated by the encounter of mutually incompatible worldviews and philosophies, there has risen the existential problem which raises acute questions about how we are going to live our lives in the midst of so many options which also stand in dialectical opposition. Hence, currently we face pluralism as the very practical question of planetary human coexistence (Panikkar, 1979b, pp.200-201). However, Panikkar takes a radical view of pluralism with his interpretation of *advaita*. So much so that he considers both as alternatives and not contradicting. They both synchronize in a unified way in the exposition of Panikkar. To put it in other words, the *advaitic* understanding permeates the understanding about pluralism. It helps us to have a new perspective of pluralism than what is commonly held.

Commonly pluralism is understood as, "the liberal idea of many equally valid paths to salvation or the view that the various religions constitute phenomenal manifestations of one transcendent noumenon" (Prabhu, 1996, p.8). Panikkar elaborates his new perspective of pluralism through the *advaitic* spectacle. When viewed from the *advaitic* spectacle, "pluralism appears as an awareness leading to a *positive* acceptance of *diversity* - an acceptance which neither forces the different attitudes into an artificial unity, nor alienates them by reductionistic manipulations" (Panikkar, 1979b, p.208). This new perspective calls for the awareness of the inadequacies of the monistic and dualistic

approaches, without which the understanding would be incomplete.

6. Inadequacy of Monistic and Dualistic Approaches

Although monism as a philosophical standpoint in the discussion of metaphysics is an ongoing debate, the implications of such a standpoint seem to have upheld monoculturalism, yielding the conviction in favour of one empire, one church, one God, one civilization, one party, one technology, etc., that leads to a kind of hegemony which many would not appreciate. In such a tendency the weaker is swallowed by the stronger. The need of toleration of the other remains until we can conquer, convert, convince or indoctrinate them as the weaker party. Patience, prudence, tolerance adjacent to strategy, apostolate, conversion, victory and the like becomes the unseen weapons. Colonialism and imperialism also project in this progression (Panikkar, 1979b, p.206). This is unhealthy and hence, monistic approach seems to be inadequate.

On the other hand, with a similar ramification employed to monism, dualism too proves inadequate because of its allowance of free enterprise, interplay, propaganda and so forth. Here the question is not whether one is stronger or weaker. It only works as long as both are more or less equally powerful. It takes place on the acceptance of the dialectical game. The worldviews of either side are permitted a free dialectical interaction. Coexistence becomes the rule which enables the dialectical exchange to take place on all levels. Any opinion could be presented if it descends into the dialectical platform and struggles on its own behalf. The Democratic formula of the majority against the minority becomes the hidden weapon. In this dialectical game, if one is defeated, it will lose the right to exist (Panikkar, 1979b, p.207). This extinction cannot be allowed for the sake of a diversified and healthier life. Finally, Panikkar says, "Human thought has been seesawing for its entire history between these two extremes [monism and dualism], although, in the final analysis, the best minds in the many human traditions have always been striving to find a *via media*, a *madhyama*...the Trinity and *advaita* are simply two names for this middle way" (Panikkar, 2010, p.215) which helps us to understand

the pluralistic diversity of reality without motivating us for an artificial unity. It could be said here that the *advaitic* interpretation of Panikkar overcomes the apparent incompatibilities that seem to pervade reality. In this regard, Panikkar's central thread of thought that runs through all his writings, i.e., the cosmotheandric vision of reality comes as another alternative to Panikkar's understanding of *advaita*.

7. A New Look at Reality: Cosmotheandric Vision(!)

Panikkar conceives of reality in a triadic structure where the three irreducible dimensions of reality, namely the divine, the human and the cosmos are constitutively connected. The ground for this vision is none other than Panikkar's understanding of Hindu *advaita* and Christian Trinity which emphasizes on the constitutive connection. He sees a mutual fecundation of these two. It means that the understanding of *advaita* permeates the understanding of Trinity, and again, the understanding of Trinity permeates the understanding of *advaita*. His book *The Trinity and the Religious Experience of Man*, elaborates on the mannerism of this mutual fecundation (Panikkar, 1973, pp.25-69). Both attempt to overcome the inadequacies of dualism without falling into monism from different perspectives. Trinity and *advaita* belongs to a distinct universe. However, Panikkar claims that just as Trinity is not a Christian monopoly, so is *advaita* not an exclusively indic insight for he sees both as beyond being theological belief systems (Panikkar, 2010, p.224).

Panikkar considers "trinity" and "*advaita*" as alternative symbols for the cosmotheandric Mystery. He applies the 'adual' understanding of the relation of poles, in comprehending the mutual relations of the persons in the Trinity (Cousins, p.120). He writes, "*advaita* applied to the Trinity would mean that there are not three distinct beings... but that the only I loves himself and discovers his nonduality (which is the Spirit) in the (him)self which is the Thou (the Son). The Trinity, on the other hand, applied to *advaita*, would show that non-dualism can have room for Love" (Panikkar, 1979a, p.287). Cousins echoes the mind of Panikkar thus, "For him, this indicates that reality is not dualistic; it is not

divided into separate segments. Rather, it is radically relational, organic, holistic" (p.120). The holistic sense based on relationality is the new perspective Panikkar gives to *advaita*. What appears as two, such as God and the world, through *advaitic* intuition is seen as not ontologically separated but related through complementarity (Cousins, p.120).

Panikkar categorically states, "To say human nature is one, or to say Truth is one, or even to say God is one, is philosophically ambiguous... Man is not monistic, nor God monotheistic, nor Truth monolithic. A reasoning reason which closes or locks our awareness or comprehension into *one* intelligibility is a plain fallacy. There is a kind of *perichoresis*, a 'dwelling within one another,' of these three dimensions of Reality: the Divine, the Human and the Cosmic" (Panikkar, 1979b, pp.216-217). He sees the *theos*, the *anthropos* and the *cosmos* as three fundamental irreducible invariant dimensions of reality which is presented by him as the cosmotheandric vision of reality. In other words, the trinity of cosmic matter, human consciousness and divine presence exist in co-constitutive relationality. These three basic dimensions of reality interpenetrate one another and exist only in relation to one another (Prabhu, 2010, p.xvii).

8. Three Dimensions and Characteristics

Each of these dimensions needs a short description here. Panikkar discerns the divine dimension as "the infinite inexhaustibility of any real being, its ever-open character, its mystery, or its freedom, to put it in another parlance" (Panikkar, 1984, p.29). No limit could be applied to this dimension. He notes, "To place limits on being - *qua* being - is to destroy it. To isolate a being - were this even possible - would amount to stifling it, killing it, cutting the umbilicus which unites it to being" (Panikkar, 1998, p.61). Regarding the human dimension, he says, "Every real being... is within the range of consciousness; it is thinkable, and by this very fact tied up with human awareness" (Panikkar, 1998, p.61). We as human beings cannot speak, or think, or affirm anything whatsoever - positively or negatively - about anything which is not connected with our consciousness. Hence, Panikkar particularly mentions that this dimension could be called the dimension of

consciousness as well as the human dimension, for whatever consciousness may be, it is manifest in and through humans. Even if we defend the possibility of a consciousness totally independent of humans, this very affirmation already contradicts such an independence, because the affirmation itself is consciously made by human beings (Panikkar, 1998, pp.61-62). Panikkar considers the cosmic dimension as the body dimension of reality, which is tangible, concrete and objectifiable (Raj, p.139). Every being shares in the secularity of the World. Anything that enters human consciousness cannot enter without at once entering into relation with the World. Even the extramundane existences, if they exist, their figures of speech is worldly and the very act of negating their relation with the world already constitutes a relation, though a negative one (Panikkar, 1998, p.64). Panikkar says, "Even if we say that an angel is above matter and beyond space and time, these references already tie it to our World" (Panikkar, 1998, p.64).

Having briefly described them, Panikkar ascribes some characteristics for these in their relations. None of these dimensions stand in isolation (Panikkar, 2016, p.73) and none of these could claim centrality over the other (Panikkar, 2010, p.403). Such is their constitutive relationship. Each of these are poles such that one pole would lose its identity, if seen as disconnected. This consciousness of interconnections is the emerging consciousness, Panikkar states as a fruit of *advaitic* intuition (Panikkar, 2010, pp.226-227). The implications that follow this perspective of reality geared via *advaitic* intuition could be many. A significant one among them is the demand for a conscious journey that is cross-cultural, which cuts across the barriers of cultures.

9. Need for a Cross-Cultural Journey

The *advaitic* view of Panikkar which convincingly relates to his pluralism and cosmotheandric vision of reality; all the three in one-line stresses on the deeper relationality that subsist in reality. The same relationality is not out of place when it comes to the incommensurable viewpoints of diverse cultures. There may not be common traditions, beliefs, doctrine, behaviours among them but they cannot claim for isolation and independency given the strong relational element of reality in which various cultures survive.

Therefore, the *advaitic* insight should lead us to see the need for cross-cultural encounter rather than viewing them in-themselves or in isolation. The illuminative rays from one into the other would certainly brighten aspects of one religion or culture to fuller enlightenment. This is at least true in the case of Panikkar who travelled from Christianity to Hinduism to Buddhism without having ceased to be a Christian (Panikkar, 1999, p.42), whereby the vision of reality he presents is holistic and becomes the need of the hour.

With an *advaitic* and pluralistic mindset, Panikkar puts forth this question: "How can we pretend to deal with the ultimate problems of Man if we insist on reducing the human being to only the American, or to only the Christian, or to the black, or the male, or the exclusively heterosexual, or the healthy and 'normal', or the so-called civilized? Obviously we cannot" (Panikkar, 1979b, p.203). To realize this, we need to break our confinements and take up the cross-cultural journey which may open up many unseen facts and realities. Wider the vision, wider will be our realization of the depth of reality. Most often we sink into a narrow mindset and perspective. Even though rootedness in one's own culture gives identity to oneself; it should not be a barrier to expose oneself to other cultures to imbibe the other perspectives of life. Leading one's self to the truth of other cultures cannot be a loss of one's identity. This does not mean that one should denounce one's religion and embrace another completely; rather the purpose is to be open-minded to others without building a closure. It also seeks for self-motivated efforts to know and understand the other. This assists us in moving beyond the fundamentalistic attitudes resulting in the avoidance of religious and communal clashes. It further renders for renunciation of dominance in any form.

Let us be aware that we are living in an atmosphere of religious fanaticism and political dominance. It is also sad that cultural imperialism has become a new trade and innovative strategy for marketing in the global economy to the detriment of cultural products made in one's own soil. Even the perspectives need to change to have fresh and creative outlook that would benefit all inclusively. Brainstorming session is a good example to

understand the benefit of cross-cultural approach. Brainstorming session helps to gather various ideas of a particular issue, which a single perception would not offer. This is the practical viewpoint that supports the need for a cross-cultural journey, I suppose. Each of us is only a single entity in a web. The dooming or booming of our human life rests on this realization. In our hands resides the decision about our journey, whether our vision of existence should either become narrower or wider depending on whether we close-up or cross-over.

End Notes

(!) - Here Panikkar's synchronic view and not the diachronic (Prabhu, 1996, p.4), is presented, to avoid the deviation from the focus of this paper.

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