

Interreligious Dialogue as a Method of Understanding: the Case of Raimundo Panikkar

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Abstract

The dialogical method of understanding developed here is indebted to Raimundo Panikkar, a pioneer of inter-religious dialogue and comparative theology.³⁹ Specifically, the method draws on Panikkar's cross-cultural hermeneutics, which provides critical tools that only come from the practice of dialogue. The tools this method incorporates are called by Panikkar the "imparative attitude" and "dialogical dialogue."

Introduction

There are many views on the nature and purpose of inter-religious dialogue. Here, inter-religious dialogue is interpreted as a method to better understand religions, specifically, insider's perspectives and the assumptions of interpreters.

This academic form of inter-religious dialogue involves three different kinds of conversation: interpersonal, intrapersonal, and critical-comparative. That is, face to face dialogue with representatives of other religious traditions, inner dialogue with one's convictions and assumptions, and scholarly dialogue with textual sources from at least two hermeneutical or religious traditions. I call this dialogical method 'academic inter-religious dialogue.' The thesis of the article is that academic inter-religious dialogue possesses not only practical but also scholarly value. In other words, inter-religious dialogue should not be considered an activity that uses scholarship solely to advance its own practical goals, but rather, inter-religious dialogue can be seen as a valuable academic method that contributes to a much fuller understanding of religions.

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This article has three parts. The first part introduces the concept of academic inter-religious dialogue. The second part explains Panikkar's critical tools and how they contribute to a fuller understanding of religious traditions. More specifically, academic inter-religious dialogue possess not only hermeneutical value but also critical constructive value: it leads to new interpretative insights as well as the refinement of the categories we use to understand religions. The third part further justifies the practice of inter-religious dialogue as a best practice in the academic study of religions.

Using dialogue as a method of understanding religions is not unprecedented in the study of religions, especially among those favoring anthropological approaches to religious studies. What is less common is to claim that inter-religious dialogue is an indispensable method to study and compare living texts. By living texts I mean texts that are still relevant and authoritative in actual religious communities. By emphasizing inter-religious dialogue and living texts, I do not want to insinuate that studies based exclusively on textual sources have no place in the academia. The point is that dialogue with representatives of religious communities is an indispensable tool to understand not only the followers of religions but also their sacred texts. As the scholar of Hinduism and comparative religion Gavin Flood acknowledges "The sacred text has a 'voice' from the past that is complex in its formation—perhaps being the totality of authorial voices that have composed it—and enlivened by the present communities who set the text aside, breathe life into it through their reading or reception, and enact it (2006, 53). If it is true that living texts have many voices not only in the past but also in present religious communities, then scholars should try to understand these voices as much as possible. Ignoring the present voices of sacred texts is academically and ethically questionable. I fail to see how we can understand the present voices without some sort of inter-religious dialogue and how someone can justify today that scholars must pay attention only to the voices of the past, as if there were a transcendent Platonic world of ideas where the meaning of texts remains unchangeable. Given that meaning of texts is not absolutely independent from readers and their contexts, a dialogical turn seems unavoidable. The dialogical turn is also unavoidable because, as the scholar of Hinduism and comparative religion Diane

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Eck suggests, “the complexity of today’s religious and scholarly worlds involves every student of religion in multiple conversations, with many voices insistent on being heard on their own terms,” (2000, 132).

1. The practice of academic inter-religious dialogue

Academic inter-religious dialogue is a method of understanding religions that involves three distinct yet interrelated kinds of conversation: interpersonal, intrapersonal, and critical-comparative. Although these three kinds of conversation can be considered three different types of inter-religious dialogue, I understand them as three complementary aspects of a dialogical method to study religious traditions.

The first kind of conversation involved in academic inter-religious dialogue is the actual practice of dialogue with members of other religions. This social dialogue is what most people identify with inter-religious dialogue. In my account, however, interpersonal dialogue is just one aspect of academic inter-religious dialogue.

Interpersonal inter-religious dialogue can be mediated or unmediated. When the dialogue is facilitated by someone—usually experts or members from at least two religious communities, then we speak of mediated interpersonal dialogue. Mediated interpersonal dialogue can take place in many settings, usually formal ones, including monasteries, churches, community centers, colleges, and universities. Examples of mediated interpersonal dialogue are interfaith meetings, monastic exchanges, panels and roundtables with representatives of several religions. These mediated encounters can occur at different levels: local, regional, national, and international. Unmediated interpersonal dialogue can happen spontaneously anywhere, in the aforementioned formal settings as well as in less formal settings including the workplace, hotel lobbies and restaurants, private houses, and even street corners.

For Panikkar, interpersonal dialogue is a constitutive part of our nature, an act that defines us as human beings. Panikkar often speaks of humans as *homo loquens*, beings who talk, that is, who exist in and through “communication” with diverse aspects of reality, which he symbolically calls cosmic, divine, and human (*cosmotheandric*). Another way of emphasizing the dialogical nature of human beings is by saying that we are not individuals but rather persons. In other words, we are not individual monads who once gathered “decide” to establish relationships with other monads. Rather, we are persons, relational beings, knots intrinsically constituted by a network of connections with diverse aspects of reality. The dialogical nature of human beings is according to Panikkar, rooted in the dialogical nature of reality, which he calls “pluralistic” in the technical sense of being irreducible to one or many, monolithic unity or fragmented multiplicity (1993).

Panikkar’s dialogical philosophy is complex but for our purposes not strictly necessary. Whether or not someone agrees with all that Panikkar says, one can accept the truism that human beings are dialogical: they need relationships with different kinds of reality in order to survive and develop. Today, globalization and the increasing religious pluralism of many communities make the practice of inter-religious dialogue difficult to avoid and convenient to better accomplish a variety of goals, from mutual understanding and respect to global neighborliness and solidarity.

According to Panikkar, interpersonal inter-religious dialogue is not a luxury for some, even less the monopoly of any group or elite, whether religious leaders or

representatives of religious communities. Rather, interpersonal inter-religious dialogue is at the very least necessary for all living in pluralistic societies. Any gathering that involves persons from at least two religions may be an occasion for practicing inter-religious dialogue. This does not mean, however, that whenever two persons from different religious traditions meet, they always have to practice inter-religious dialogue; rather, the point is that any inter-religious encounter offers the possibility for developing our dialogical potential through the practice of interpersonal inter-religious dialogue.

The second kind of conversation that constitutes academic inter-religious dialogue takes place within a person after having “personally” encountered other religious traditions. Panikkar calls this inner conversation intra-religious dialogue, which should not be confused with intra-denominational dialogue. While intra-religious dialogue occurs within a person as a response to other religions, intra-denominational dialogue happens among members of the same religious community, denomination, or religion. In order to avoid this possible misunderstanding, perhaps it would be a good idea to call this type of dialogue intrapersonal instead of intra-religious.

Intrapersonal dialogue begins when something stirs within us, when we feel threatened, encouraged, inspired, provoked, or profoundly shaken by other religious traditions. Like interpersonal dialogue, intrapersonal dialogue is rooted in another dimension of our nature, in this case, in the unavoidable human quest for meaning and truth. For Panikkar, intrapersonal dialogue is the ultimate foundation of other forms of inter-religious dialogue. If there is no intrapersonal dialogue, inter-religious dialogue becomes a mere intellectual exercise, an exchange of information, interesting and even entertaining, but somewhat shallow and eventually dispensable (Panikkar 1999).

The third kind of conversation involved in academic inter-religious dialogue is critical-comparative in nature. All understanding is comparative to some extent, and the former two kinds of conversation presuppose the implicit practice of comparison. However, in the third kind of conversation, comparison becomes explicit and critically constructed. That is, critical-comparative inter-religious dialogue refers to the explicit, deliberate contrast of “texts” from at least two religious or hermeneutical traditions, a contrast constructed by scholars competent in those traditions. Such critical-comparative academic practice is not exclusive to comparative studies. For instance, Scriptural Reasoning presupposes the practice of critical-comparative dialogue. Likewise, many ethnographic religious studies demonstrate the practice of critical-comparative dialogue between insiders’ and outsiders’ perspectives. Unlike the previous two aspects of academic inter-religious dialogue, this critical-comparative conversation is not for everybody but specifically for scholars and theologians of religious traditions. This does not mean, however, that only scholars and theologians can benefit from academic inter-religious dialogue. In fact, the critical-comparative inter-religious dialogue practiced by scholars and theologians can be understood as a useful foundation for inter-religious dialogue in general.

The practice of interpersonal and intrapersonal inter-religious dialogue can take place without having enough knowledge about the religious other, but, then, the risk of misunderstanding, conflict and unnecessary tension increases. The practice of interpersonal and intrapersonal inter-religious dialogue becomes more fruitful when

it presupposes some familiarity not only with the basic beliefs but also with the key ethical values and spiritual practices of the other. Critical-comparative dialogue provides this useful foundation, this reliable information about these beliefs, values, and practices of the other. Thus, critical-comparative inter-religious dialogue serves as a preparation for the practice of interpersonal and intrapersonal inter-religious dialogue.

According to Panikkar, comparisons are more fruitful for inter-religious dialogue when they focus on functional equivalents, which he calls “homeomorphic” equivalents. Homeomorphism is a special type of analogy, “perhaps a kind of existential-functional analogy” (1999, 67). However, homeomorphism is irreducible to analogy. While analogy presupposes a *tertium quid*, a common aspect between two points of comparison, homeomorphism only requires a functional equivalence. In other words, two points of comparison (terms, concepts, metaphors, doctrines, practices or symbols) are homeomorphic equivalents when “each of them stands for something that performs an equivalent function within their respective systems” (1999, 17).

The comparison of homeomorphic equivalents does not assume anything common between two compared elements or even between their respective systems. Homeomorphism does not imply that the functional equivalents are interchangeable or expressions of universal patterns common to all religions.

The advantage of comparing functional equivalents is that they cannot be discovered until the interpreter has enough familiarity with the respective framework of the two “texts” under comparison. In this way, the comparison of homeomorphic equivalents prevents precipitated and superficial comparisons, comparisons that might spread misunderstandings and hinder further inter-religious dialogue.

Overall, the first factor that distinguishes academic inter-religious dialogue from other dialogical methods to study religions is that the critical-comparative conversation with or between “texts” is inseparable from the practice of both interpersonal and intrapersonal religious dialogue. In this sense, the three kinds of conversation involved in academic inter-religious dialogue are intertwined.

The second factor that distinguishes academic inter-religious dialogue from other dialogical methods is that the practice of dialogue is not simply with or between textual sources. In other words, academic inter-religious dialogue supplements imaginary conversations constructed in the interpreter’s mind with actual face to face communication with representatives of religious communities where the textual sources under investigation are still relevant and authoritative.

Consequently, hypothetical conversations with or between textual sources are not sufficient to speak of academic inter-religious dialogue. Similarly, a mere dialogical approach to study religion, for instance the one proposed by Gavin Flood in *Beyond Phenomenology: Rethinking the Study of Religion* (1999), does not qualify yet as academic inter-religious dialogue. In order to speak of academic inter-religious dialogue, the comparative conversation with or between textual sources must be supplemented by the practice of intrapersonal dialogue and actual interpersonal dialogue with representatives of living religious communities. In this sense, Scriptural Reasoning and certain works in Religious Studies and Comparative Theology can be understood as expressions of academic inter-religious dialogue.

The third factor that characterizes academic inter-religious dialogue is its interdisciplinary nature. Like other scholarly methods, academic inter-religious dialogue can be practiced within different disciplines. In this regard, academic inter-religious dialogue is interdisciplinary. However, academic inter-religious dialogue can also be considered interdisciplinary in the sense that in some cases it combines philological and ethnographic methods. In other words, scholars cannot practice academic inter-religious dialogue from behind their desks. This however, does not mean that one has to be a professional ethnographer in order to practice inter-religious dialogue as an academic method of understanding.

The fourth factor that differentiates academic inter-religious dialogue from other dialogical methods is that its goal is not only theoretical, to improve our understanding of the texts under comparison, but also practical, to facilitate sustainable dialogue among living religious traditions. By sustainable dialogue it is meant an open-ended constructive engagement with other faiths at three different levels: the intellectual, the ethical, and the spiritual. By constructive engagement it is meant mutually enriching interactions. The intellectual level of dialogue refers to the hermeneutical dimension of dialogue, in which building bridges of understanding and communication are the main goals. The ethical level of dialogue denotes the sociopolitical dimension, primarily intended to prevent conflicts, facilitate reconciliation and advance common values. By spiritual level of dialogue, it is meant the dimension of individual exploration and inner growth, which is part of the human quest for truth. This spiritual dimension enhances the other two dimensions, making them theologically and soteriologically significant, not simply useful.

Although other academic methods may also promote inter-religious dialogue, they are not intended to do so. On the contrary, academic inter-religious dialogue is done in, through, and for the sake of furthering the cause of sustainable inter-religious dialogue. This requires from the practitioner of academic inter-religious dialogue a particular attitude and approach to dialogue.

2. Panikkar's cross-cultural hermeneutics.

For Panikkar, the ultimate goals of interreligious dialogue are communication and mutual understanding, not agreement, conversion, or the creation of a new universal religion. In Panikkar's words: "The ideal is communication in order to bridge the gulfs of mutual ignorance and misunderstandings between the different cultures of the world, letting them speak and speak out their own insights in their own languages," (1999, 10).

Communication and mutual understanding are ends in and of themselves, though they may also serve as means for variety of practical goals including social justice, peace, personal realization and the mutual enrichment of human traditions. But what exactly does Panikkar mean by understanding? What is the proper method to understand other religious traditions?

According to Panikkar, cross-cultural understanding requires a new type of hermeneutics, which he calls "diatopical." That is, a hermeneutics that involves "two (or more) cultures, which have independently developed in different spaces (*topoi*) their own methods of philosophizing and ways of reaching intelligibility along with their proper categories" (1988, 130).

The fundamental assumption of diatopical hermeneutics is that the other does not necessarily have the same self-understanding as I have (1979, 9). Each person—a term Panikkar uses to refer to individuals as well as to cultures and religions—is a source of understanding and self-understanding. This assumption has important consequences for the study of religions. Given that members of other religions are sources of self-understanding, we do not have the right to superimpose our parameters and categories of understanding on them. Another consequence is that we cannot understand others' religions unless we participate to some extent in the believer's horizon of intelligibility. This is what Panikkar calls the principle of understanding as conviction: "we cannot understand a person's ultimate convictions unless we somehow share them" (1999, 34). The principle of understanding as conviction does not entail that the interpreter must convert to the other religion in order to understand it. The principle is hermeneutical, not religious, it only assumes that in order to understand other religious person, one needs to share to some extent the source of her beliefs, what Panikkar calls *mythos*, that is, the horizon of intelligibility that give rise to that person's convictions (1975, 132-167; 1999, 38; 2003, 70-71).

The principle of understanding as conviction goes beyond phenomenological approaches to the study of religions. For Panikkar, the phenomenological method "has its own merits and justification, because there is room for a clear and valid description of religious phenomena," (1999, 76). However, the phenomenological method as it is commonly understood is insufficient to capture the belief of the believer. Since there is no naked or pure belief separate from the person who believes, the knowledge or *noêma* of a religiously skeptical phenomenologist does not correspond to the belief or *pisteuma* of the believer (1999, 83). Consequently, studies of religions are somewhat incomplete as long as they limit themselves to analyze and describe religious phenomena from the outside. The problem is not solved by interviewing members of other religions and including their opinions in our phenomenological descriptions. In order to capture the belief of the believer, the religious scholar needs to actually participate in the horizon of intelligibility of the religious other. In other words, understanding requires not a juxtaposition of outsider's and insider's voices, but rather a "religious" phenomenology that encompasses the belief of the believer.

Panikkar's hermeneutics avoids simplistic dilemmas between insiders' and outsiders' perspectives, as if all insiders' readings were purely subjective (uncritical) and all outsiders' views were purely objective ("neutral"). Similarly, Panikkar's hermeneutics overcomes the dilemma between theological versus social scientific studies of religion. Panikkar's principle of understanding as conviction is not intended to undermine the critical study of religions. Rather, the goal seems to be to expand narrow, pre-postmodern, merely rationalistic interpretations of religious studies. Panikkar's hermeneutics allows and calls for a pluralistic understanding of religious studies where both theological and social scientific approaches have a place not only in the field as a whole but also within particular scholars. Panikkar's ideal interpreter pays attention to the many voices involved in the process of understanding, which requires familiarity with the theological expression of traditions as well as social scientific studies and methods.

Extensive fieldwork, collaborative interviews, and participatory observation of the other's religious practices are indispensable steps for understanding living religions. Likewise, familiarity with the languages, texts, history, and contexts of other religious traditions is also necessary for the religious scholar. However, for Panikkar the scholar needs to supplement all these useful methods with actual participation in the horizon of intelligibility of other religions.

This participation is achieved through what Panikkar calls the "imparative attitude" and "dialogical dialogue." Unlike the comparative attitude of pre-postmodern religious studies, the imparative attitude does not claim to study religions from an alleged neutral and objective vantage point. The imparative scholar must be critically self-aware of his or her hermeneutical location.

Besides critical self-awareness of the situated nature of understanding, the imparative attitude requires from the scholar "the effort at learning from the other and the attitude of allowing our own convictions to be fecundated by the insights of the other" (1995, 172).

The neologism "imparative" derives from the Latin verb *imparare*, which according to Panikkar, means primarily "bringing together." This bringing together of two cultures or religious traditions takes place within the scholar's horizon of intelligibility. The imparative attitude as well as the understanding it brings about must be reflective, critical, provisional, aware of its own contingency, and the need to rest on "both limited and still unexamined presuppositions. We are not the only source of (self-) understanding" (1988, 128).

Panikkar compares the process of understanding that takes place with the imparative attitude to the immersion required to learn a foreign language. First, one translates by comparing with the mother tongue, but, eventually, one is able to think and speak directly in the other language. One begins by studying grammar, acquiring basic conversation skills, and taking holiday trips to a country where the language under study is spoken. Similarly, one starts the academic study of other religions and cultures by reading classical and contemporary sources, attending courses about them, and by taking field trips. However, although all these steps are useful and necessary, they do not always lead to understanding in Panikkar's sense. In order to understand the other, one needs to cross over the borders of one's own culture or religion. It is by crossing the borders of at least two cultures or religions and by bringing them together in one's own horizon of intelligibility that the interpreter reaches understanding. It is only by becoming somehow bilingual that one can best translate other language. Similarly, it is by bringing together two religions in one's own hermeneutical horizon that one can better compare them.

The other tool of Panikkar's hermeneutics is dialogical dialogue. Panikkar distinguishes between two aspects of dialogue: dialectical and dialogical. Dialectical dialogue takes place at the level of doctrines, and it treats members of other religions as objects of rational inquiry or subjects merely putting forth some objective thoughts to be discussed. On the contrary, dialogical dialogue involves the entire person, not just our rational dimension, and it treats others as "another self (alter) who is a source of self-understanding as well as a source of understanding not necessarily reducible to my own" (1999, 34). In other words, dialogical dialogue treats others as another person, a real "you." For Panikkar the I/Thou relationship is ultimate and irreducible to any relation I/It or I/Non-I. The other person is not an other (an *alius*),

even less an “it” (*aliud*), but rather another self (*alter*), a “you” who is not my ego and yet, belongs to my self. This belonging of the “you” to my self underscores the interrelatedness of our respective identities. For Panikkar, this interrelatedness of the “I” and the “you” entails pluralism in the technical sense of not being reducible to monism or dualism, monolithic unity or fragmented multiplicity.

In order to have access to the “you” dimension of another person, one needs dialogical dialogue. Dialectical dialogue does not transcend the level of ideas and objectified thoughts, that is, the level of the logos, what “he” or “she” thinks. Since persons are more than their logos and their thoughts, dialogical dialogue is necessary. Only dialogical dialogue “pierces the logos and uncovers the respective myths of the partner” (1999, 37). This does not mean that dialogical dialogue is irrational or illogical but rather that it is more than an encounter of reasons and ideas, more than an encounter with the “other,” a “you” is neither the “other” nor an “it.” Dialogical dialogue leads to the encounter of persons, and, therefore, it requires friendship and loving knowledge, which “discovers the you, not the other,” (2004, 59). It is this friendship and loving knowledge what allows us to participate in the horizon of intelligibility of other persons. Sympathetic imagination is not sufficient. It is through the practice of dialogical dialogue that we develop the loving knowledge necessary to expand our horizon of intelligibility until it actually participates in the other’s horizon.

Panikkar goes beyond Gadamer’s hermeneutics when he claims that an authentic fusion of horizons requires a loving knowledge of the other’s beliefs. Gadamer’s fusion of horizon is an intellectual, a dialectical encounter that results in understanding a third object, a shared subject matter (1989, 307). On the other hand, Panikkar’s hermeneutics seeks to understand a person, a real “you”, a subject with moral agency and self-understanding. Gadamer’s hermeneutics distinguishes between the person with whom we speak and the subject matter of our conversations. However, as the scholar of comparative religious ethics Irene Oh points out such distinction is not always so clear in conversations about our most profound beliefs: “Inquiries, discussions, and criticisms of closely and long-held beliefs are inquiries, discussions, and criticisms, not only about a subject matter, but also about an aspect of a person,” (2008, 413-4). Gadamer’s hermeneutics seems to be applicable primarily to works of art and textual sources, where the dialectical movement of play is the main metaphor (Schweiker 1987). On the contrary, Panikkar’s hermeneutics stems from his profound experience of inter-religious dialogue with persons: living traditions and real people, not just texts and subject matters. A personal encounter is the main metaphor of Panikkar’s hermeneutics.

Panikkar describes the loving knowledge necessary for having a personal encounter where understanding takes place as certain connaturality and identification with the subject. This loving knowledge by connaturality is substantially deeper than Gadamer’s fusion of horizons, which takes place primarily at the rational level, in which logical or dialectical knowledge prevails. On the other hand, loving knowledge affects the entire person, and involves more than her logos.

For Panikkar, loving knowledge is crucial to understand other persons and have access into their self-representation. The golden rule of Panikkar’s hermeneutics are precisely that unless other persons can recognize themselves in our descriptions of them, our interpretations are somehow inadequate: we are not representing them

properly. This does not mean that in order to make a good interpretation we have to accept uncritically whatever other persons say about themselves and their traditions. It just means that we cannot interpret other persons without paying careful attention to their voices and, more importantly, without participating to some extent in the mythos or horizon of intelligibility from which those voices originate.

Overall, the hermeneutical value of Panikkar's approach to inter-religious dialogue cannot be underestimated: it pays proper attention to the "multiple voices" involved in the process of understanding; it helps to interpret religious traditions in their own terms; it avoids false dilemmas and the pitfalls of old comparativism, and it challenges solipsistic academic practices characteristic of pre-postmodern scholarship.

More specifically, academic inter-religious dialogue conducted with Panikkar's critical tools improves the scholar's critical self-awareness and contributes to a fuller understanding of religious traditions. First, regarding critical self-awareness, the practice of interpersonal and intrapersonal inter-religious dialogue helps scholars to better understand their assumptions, prejudices, and hermeneutical location. The unavoidable comparisons that inter-religious dialogue produces in the scholar's mind are less likely to arise via other academic methods. The new insights and new perspectives brought about by intrapersonal dialogue and interpersonal dialogue with real people from other religious communities are less likely to originate via dialogues with or between textual sources. Likewise, comparisons done in and through dialogical dialogue and loving knowledge are likely to produce much deeper understandings of religious traditions than comparisons done in and through dialectical dialogues and "professionally conducted" surveys and interviews. Second, academic inter-religious dialogue also contributes to a fuller understanding of religious traditions because it incorporates in a deeper way the self-understanding of living religious communities into the scholar's horizon of intelligibility. By expanding the scholar's hermeneutical horizon with the self-understanding of other religious traditions, inter-religious dialogue is likely to refine our categories of understanding and, in that way, prevent their uncritical imposition onto others. That is, inter-religious dialogue refines our interpretations and leads gradually to understanding religious traditions in their own terms without necessarily losing a critical standpoint. Although I concede that one can gain some access to the self-understanding of persons (religious traditions) through dialectical dialogue, I fail to see how such access can match the one obtained via dialogical dialogue. In other words, the expansion of one's horizon of intelligibility that produces a mere intellectual knowledge does not surpass the expansion generated by a knowledge that involves the entire person in the process of understanding.

A possible objection is that loving knowledge and personal involvement cloud the interpreters' judgment rather than help them to better understand religious traditions. While this might be the case on some occasions, assuming that cognitive emotions and personal involvement have no hermeneutical relevance is, today, untenable, a questionable rationalistic bias rooted in a dualistic view of human nature.

Even though academic inter-religious dialogue is in principle open to a variety of critical tools and theoretical assumptions, I recommend Panikkar's. This, I believe, is not contradictory, as it would not be contradictory to advice a particular road to

reach a destination while being aware of the existence of other possible roads. Since I do not know of better critical tools to practice academic inter-religious dialogue, I can only but recommend Panikkar's.

3. Inter-religious dialogue as a best in the academic study of religion.

It might be objected that good scholars in comparative studies and area studies also practice some sort of inter-religious dialogue, and therefore, they already do something, at least indirectly, to advance the diverse goals of inter-religious dialogue. Thus, the objection goes, there seems to be no need for academic inter-religious dialogue, even less for a dialogical method that draws on Panikkar.

While it would be unfair to deny the possible contribution of good scholarship to inter-religious dialogue, it would be equally unfair to claim that any approach to dialogue has the same potential to advance the diverse goals of academic inter-religious dialogue. At the very least, we should differentiate between dialogical methods like Panikkar's that involve the actual face-to-face and heart-to-heart practice of dialogue and those that involve only virtual and imaginary conversations. Furthermore, we should differentiate between dialogical methods like Panikkar's that treat other religious traditions as subjects with their own self-understanding, and others that treat them as mere data, objects to be understood. In other words, we should differentiate between dialogical methods that "care" about people, and others that "care" exclusively about their "texts." That is, between methods that treat people as agents of understanding and self-understanding, and others that treat people as if they were texts whose content the interpreter can objectify through surveys and "professionally conducted" interviews.

Academic inter-religious dialogue does "care" both about people and their "texts" by paying attention to the "multiple voices" involved in the process of understanding. By "multiple voices" I mean not only the many voices of textual sources and scholarly communities, but also the multiple voices of living religious traditions and especially the voice of the interpreter.

It would be irresponsible and somehow arrogant to practice today 'solipsistic scholarship,' as if cross-cultural interpreters could become aware of their own assumptions and hermeneutical prejudices without actual dialogue with the religious other, and more importantly, without profound intrapersonal or intra-religious dialogue. Not being concerned with critical self-awareness, which requires honest intra-religious dialogue, is hermeneutically naïve. Likewise, not treating other religious communities as subjects of self-understanding, self-understanding that can only be discovered through interpersonal dialogue, is academically questionable and morally dubious. These solipsistic practices are a residue of paternalistic and ethnocentric attitudes characteristic of orientalist and colonialist scholarship. Most scholars would agree in rejecting these "past" academic attitudes, yet very few would be willing to do what is necessary to prevent them, namely, inter-religious dialogue in the aforementioned interpersonal and intrapersonal senses.

After the postmodern and postcolonialist critique of the history of religions and its old comparativism, religious studies done without paying proper attention to the "multiple voices" involved in the process of understanding are today simply unacceptable. If this normative claim is plausible, then it follows that inter-religious

dialogue as an academic method of understanding is not only desirable but also indispensable for critical scholarship. In other words, if it is true that one cannot pay proper attention to the “multiple voices” involved in the process of understanding without interpersonal and intrapersonal inter-religious dialogue, then critical scholarship cannot take place without some form of inter-religious dialogue.

Although I do not think we can ever measure the exact amount of attention to “voice” found in dialogical methods, we can intuitively assume that studies done in, through, and for the sake of inter-religious dialogue are likely to pay more attention to “voice” than studies done in conversation with textual sources and other “solipsistic” scholars. In sum, not all dialogical methods are equally valid to practice academic inter-religious dialogue.

Similarly, not all approaches to dialogue are equally suitable for academic inter-religious dialogue. Approaches to dialogue that presuppose an exclusivist theology of religions are evidently conversation stoppers. Inclusivist approaches in the sense of understanding others not in their own terms but rather in terms of one’s own religious framework are academically problematic. Religions should be allowed to define themselves in their own terms without being forced to fit into foreign categories or conceptual frameworks inconsistent with their worldview. This is a fundamental ethical requirement of cross-cultural understanding and interfaith dialogue. The golden rule applies also to interpretations of other religions that take place in the academia or the social arena. In the same way we would not like others to use concepts that misrepresent or do violence to our religion we should try to avoid concepts that misrepresent or do violence to other religions.

Pluralistic approaches are not without problems, but they are by far the most suitable for the practice of academic inter-religious dialogue (McCarthy 2000). By pluralistic it is not meant the new forms of inclusivism called pluralistic inclusivism but rather any framework that allows for genuine openness to religious pluralism without setting *a priori*, that is, dogmatically, limits to the truths and values that can and cannot be found in other religions. Among the different pluralistic frameworks, I find Panikkar’s the most conducive to understanding religious traditions in their own terms precisely because it is based on the practice of inter-religious dialogue. Here, however, is not the place to justify this claim and compare Panikkar’s pluralism to the more well known models of John Hick and Paul Knitter, which, unlike Panikkar’s, have been criticized by pluralistic inclusivists such as Mark Heim for not being pluralistic enough. Suffice to say that I prefer Panikkar’s pluralism for a variety of reasons. First, it views inter-religious dialogue as a critical method of understanding. Panikkar’s pluralism is not a great narrative, a super system, or a universal theory of religion, even less a relativist ideology to accommodate the claims of all religions. Panikkar’s pluralism is primarily an inner attitude of intellectual humility and dialogical openness. Second, it incorporates “care” or loving knowledge into the study of religions, challenging in that way the modern myths of a “purely rational” “fully objective,” and “absolutely neutral” religious scholarship. Third, Panikkar’s pluralism emphasizes the existence of incommensurable differences and the uniqueness of religious traditions without falling into postmodern isolationism and paralyzing relativism. Fourth, it does not presuppose a perennial essence common to all religions, not even an ever transcendent “thing in itself” that is never known by

historical traditions. Fifth, it combines genuine openness toward other religions with unambiguous commitment to one's own religious or secular tradition.

By appropriating critically some of Panikkar's tools, I do not want to insinuate that only multitradeational scholars like Panikkar can practice academic inter-religious dialogue. Similarly, I do not intend to suggest that the academic study of religions should be done exclusively in order to further sustainable inter-religious dialogue, even less that scholars-practitioners of inter-religious dialogue are better equipped than other scholars to study or to compare religions. I am just proposing a dialogical method that is useful to better understand living religions and living texts.

By drawing on Panikkar's critical tools, the method does not presuppose his theological and philosophical views. The practice of academic inter-religious dialogue is not necessarily dependent on Panikkar's claims about the unknown Christ (1981), the cosmotheandric nature of reality, and the pluralism of truth (not to be misrepresented as the affirmation of many truths, which Panikkar himself views as contradictory, 1987, 109). The only thing academic inter-religious dialogue presupposes is what Panikkar calls a pluralistic attitude, which should not be mistaken with an ideology, a pluralist system or a theology of religions. This pluralistic attitude is simply a dialogical and genuinely open disposition toward the religious neighbor, "the attitude of not breaking the dialogue with the other opinions" (1999, 10).

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