

Is Transreligious Theology Possible?

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Trinitarian Theology between Religious Walls in the Writings of Raimon Panikkar

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Abstract: The Theology Without Walls (TWW) project attempts to interpret spiritual experiences without subjecting them to a priori criteria from religious traditions, but TWW does not substitute universalized secular criteria for religious criteria. Some have promoted “multiple religious belonging” as a prism through which to interpret the experiences of people participating in more than one spiritual path. Yet the concept of multiple religious belonging still presumes a framework in which communal traditions coordinate one’s spiritual experiences. For TWW, however, belonging does not have to be religious or interreligious or multireligious. The manner in which practitioners thematize, or refuse to thematize, their journeys is not a prerequisite for participation in TWW. Is TWW then a sect of the disaffiliated that rejects communal encounters and traditions? How does TWW operate in practice? Raimon Panikkar’s writings on the Trinity demonstrate how a theologian/practitioner well versed in two traditions responds to what he calls “the cosmotheandric experience” by articulating how trinitarian presence is not primarily a doctrine but contrasting facets of reality to which Christianity and Hinduism bear witness. Panikkar’s work is a model of how scholars working with TWW can engage with traditions and simultaneously remain attentive to the particularities of everyday reality.

Keywords: Trinity; comparative theology; theology of religions; interreligious dialogue; Theology Without Walls

The Theology Without Walls (TWW) project is an attempt to interpret the phenomena of spiritual experiences without subjecting these experiences to *a priori* theological criteria drawn from religious traditions. This does not mean, however, that Theology without Walls substitutes presumed universalized post-Kantian secular criteria for religious criteria, in the manner of a scholar such as John Hick.¹ In a Western world in which orthodox, Enlightenment, and Counter-Enlightenment narratives vie to establish competing intellectual frames of meaning, Theology without Walls insists upon humble attentiveness to the particularities of human spiritual experience, without necessarily insisting that such experience is a *sui generis* facet of existence that is impervious to scrutiny by other fields of study.²

TWW is then moving in a different direction than many of the debates in the Christian theology of religions that took place in the 1970s and 1980s. These centered upon contrasting typologies regarding “the names of God,” “God incarnate,” and the universality and uniqueness of divine revelation. For example, an exclusivist theology of religion holds that salvation is only mediated to human beings through one’s own religion. An inclusivist theology of religion departs from theological exclusivism in its willingness to afford revelatory value to other religious traditions, but insists that other religious traditions are at best a

¹ See Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*.

² See McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion*.

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less adequate path for adherents to achieve the enlightenment and salvation offered in one's own religion. Finally, a pluralist theology of religion does not privilege any religious tradition over another tradition, and instead claims that there are manifold paths by which a person can achieve one's existential and teleological final destination. In Christian theologies of religions, advocates of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism have set forth different positions on the salvific roles of the church, of Christ, and of God. Is membership in the church necessary for salvation or not? Is faith in Jesus Christ necessary for ultimate liberation or not? Are there soteriological avenues to God independent from Christ?³ The doctrinal and historical concerns in much of the scholarship during these decades subordinated religious persons within objectified frameworks like exclusivism, inclusivism, or pluralism. Such objectifications facilitated theological comparisons among rival positions with respect to God, Christ, and church, but only at the price of accepting the heuristic adequacy of these frameworks. In response other scholars raised trenchant questions about the presumptions behind these approaches, criticizing what they saw as inadequate reifications or insufficiently critical uses of terms such as religion, faith, and belief.⁴ This scholarly debate often pitted the arguments of those whose liberal concerns privileged universality, rationality, and egalitarianism against the arguments of postliberal scholars and historians resistant to theological metanarratives and ahistorical generalizations about religious behavior. As the theology of religions has now entered the third Christian millennium, where does the debate go from here? Is it destined to continue in a stalemate in which practitioners of religion must choose between their commitments to the universal scope of the divine presence and the particularities of historical revelation and traditions? Is this choice one Christians are forced to make?

Some scholars have promoted the idea of “multiple religious belonging” as a prism through which to make sense of the experiences of people who participate in more than one spiritual or religious path.⁵ Not only does multiple religious belonging upset the presumptions behind previous typologies, but it also invites religious participants to begin interreligious reflections from their own subjective experience instead of assuming the adequacy of a putatively objective frame of reference. Yet the concept of multiple religious belonging still adheres to a framework in which communal religious traditions define and coordinate one's spiritual experiences. By contrast, a heuristic map in which religions overlap rather than remaining separate is not one upon which TWW insists. In *Theology without Walls*, belonging does not have to be religious . . . or interreligious . . . or multireligious. The manner in which spiritual practitioners thematize, or refuse to thematize, their journeys is not a prerequisite for participation in *Theology without Walls*. For example, a person who engages in the TWW initiative does not need to claim that he or she belongs to both Hindu and Christian traditions. Scholar-practitioners in TWW are not required to state that they participate in both Jewish and Christian ritual ceremonies. For TWW, there is no need for people to claim that their experiences are examples of larger religious genera, whether or not those genera are classified among the revered “world religions” that have endured for centuries or millennia.

From what I have stated so far, it might seem that *Theology without Walls* is prone to remain a privatized and diffuse grouping of the religiously disaffiliated that rejects community and social encounters. Critical readers should ask proponents of TWW how their proposal would operate in practice, especially in regards to religions that TWW participants do not necessarily consider authoritative. As a way of responding to possible questions from those who are unconvinced that TWW can constructively engage with classic religious traditions, this essay uses the work of Raimon Panikkar on the Trinity to demonstrate how a theologian/practitioner well versed in two religious traditions responds to what he calls “the cosmotheandric experience.” Panikkar claimed that trinitarian presence is not primarily a doctrine but is instead contrasting facets of reality to which both Christianity and Hinduism bear witness.⁶ Panikkar's work is a model of how scholars working with TWW can engage with religious traditions and simultaneously remain attentive to

³ See among other representative works Race, *Thinking about Religious Pluralism*; Hick, *God Has Many Names*; *The Myth of God Incarnate*; Knitter, *No Other Name*?

⁴ See Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*; Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*; Heim, *Salvations*.

⁵ See Cornille ed., *Many Mansions?*; Phan, “Multiple Religious Belonging,” 497; Phan, *Being Religious Interreligiously*.

⁶ See Panikkar, *The Cosmotheandric Experience*.

those particularities of everyday reality that often escape the explicit attention of religious adherents, but which may provide evidence that the encounter with ultimate reality is much broader than world religions have cared to articulate.

Panikkar was born in 1918 in Barcelona, the son of a Spanish Christian mother and a Hindu father. Ordained a Catholic priest after being educated by the Jesuits, he earned doctorates in theology, philosophy, and chemistry between 1946 and 1961. Over a theological career that spanned almost half a century and encompassed dozens of published books, Panikkar probed both classic texts and contemporary societies in a synthetic quest for truth and cross-cultural understanding.⁷ Panikkar believed that traditional spiritualities had grasped elemental aspects of the cosmos in their approaches to myth and history, but also needed to be reformulated to encompass the insights of modern science and religious pluralism, if humanity is to overcome its sad legacy of division and war. In what follows, I take my lead from a 2002 essay by Raimundo Panikkar in which he asked the question, “Who is a Christian?” and answered with a free translation of Matthew 16:25, “Whoever cares to preserve one’s own identity is lost; whoever gives it up for my sake, will attain the true identity.”⁸ My thesis is that Panikkar’s trinitarian spirituality demonstrates that (a) multiple religious belonging ultimately depends upon an intrapersonal reconfiguration of the idea of selfhood gained through dialogue, and (b) Panikkar’s writings on the Trinity provide an existential key to understand how multiple religious belonging can only occur if it is a form of “interreligious belonging” that is not walled off by doctrinal reifications of experience.

Preparing to Scale the Wall: Deconstructing the Egocentric “Self”

For Panikkar one cannot relinquish the attachment to self though a simple act of will; this would be an example of what the Christian tradition has called “works righteousness” insofar as the self would be called upon to perform the effacement of self—a contradiction in terms. Nor can the self be transcended through a social project in which an individual adheres to a larger community of persons. Without an accompanying interior transformation, the move from the single person to a group simply places more egocentric selves in the immediate presence of one another, sometimes allowing for a magnification of selfishness directed against religious outsiders. Human history provides ample evidence of how even the most ascetic religious ideologies can perpetuate injustice and selfishness without an ongoing program of personal renewal among individual members. In Panikkar’s understanding, the goal of religious dialogue is transcendence and growth through mutual encounter. Interreligious dialogue is more than merely scavenging for information to satisfy one’s curiosity about what other people do and what they believe. Thus dialogue for Panikkar is best understood as “intrareligious” and not just interreligious, insofar as dialogue should aim at a transformation of the respective participants that makes reifications of self and other fluid and unstable. Panikkar’s dialogical dialogue travels *dia-logos*, through the logos, whereas dialectics remains bound to the *logos*:

Dialogue seeks truth by trusting the other, just as dialectics pursues truth by trusting the order of things. . . . Dialectics believes it can approach truth by the objective consistency of ideas. Dialogue believes it can advance to truth by relying on the subjective consistency of . . . dialogical partners. . . . [I]f I cannot know my myth, cannot discover my prejudices . . . I need the criticisms of my partner as well as his testimony.⁹

Dialogue here is internal to the person; it is not a form of cultural tourism in which the others are made into instruments for one’s own self-improvement. This is the necessary introductory stage in applying Panikkar’s project to Theology without Walls, for if a person is completely satisfied with one particular tradition and the sense of identity that such participation bestows, there is no motivation to make a TWW-inspired odyssey.

⁷ For a biography, see Panikkar’s 2010 obituary: Grimes, “Raimon Panikkar.” More detail can be found in Joseph Prabhu’s introduction to *The Intercultural Challenge of Raimon Panikkar*.

⁸ Panikkar, “On Christian Identity.”

⁹ Panikkar, *Myth, Faith, and Hermeneutics*, 243; see also Panikkar, *The Intrareligious Dialogue*, 29-39.

Jumping the Wall: From the Ego to Trinitarian Belonging In Three Stages

In the years after Vatican II reformulations of trinitarian doctrine sought to connect the doctrine of the Trinity with God's saving action in human history. The work of Karl Rahner is the most prominent example of this theological initiative, which sought to overcome post-Reformation divisions between nature and grace that treated revelation as an esoteric gift to which only the ecclesially privileged were admitted.¹⁰ Panikkar builds upon this trinitarian revival. The motif for Panikkar's 1973 book, *The Trinity and the Religious Experience of Man*, is Panikkar's mantra that the Trinity permeates the entire structure of existence. Affirming a point he would return to in 1993 in *The Cosmotheandric Experience*, Panikkar claimed that there is "triadic oneness existing on all levels of consciousness and of reality. . . . [The Trinity] is a revelation of God inasmuch as it is a revelation of Man."¹¹ If true, no longer is the Trinity a reality only discovered in a special revelation given to a subset of human beings. The Trinity connects God's immanence with God's saving economy in all of history.

Since the Trinity is part of present human experience, human experience is threefold and all personal relationships and belonging are determined by this paradigm. Panikkar describes three archetypes of human spirituality that he correlates with trinitarian experience. Each spirituality is essential for an adequate description of human experience, but each is prone to distortions that obscure reality. Each offers alternate definitions of what it means to belong to and in a religion, and with the egoistic self already discarded as the measuring rod by which interreligious belonging is defined, these three spiritualities demonstrate how trinitarian spirituality both allows and mandates overlapping configurations of religious identity. Panikkar correlates each person of the Trinity with one of the three spiritual paths or vocations delineated in classical Hindu religion—ritual action, devotion, and knowledge.

Worshipping the Father or Cosmological Belonging

Iconolatry is Panikkar's euphemism for idolatry, which he wants to defend despite language that is consistently provocative on this topic. He calls iconolatry "the projection of God under some *form*, his objectivation, his personification *in an object* which may be mental or material, visible or invisible, but always reducible to our human representation or . . . religious cosmo-anthropomorphism, the attribution to God of 'creaturely' forms, whether supra-human or sub-human . . . iconolatry represents a normal dimension of the religious life."¹² Iconolatry comes about because humanity has within itself an idea of divinity as being in human likeness.¹³ If this were not the case, humanity would never arrive at consciousness of the divine: "Religion, in fact, could not come into being without at least some traces of iconolatry."¹⁴

Panikkar finds a prominent example of iconolatrous spirituality in the Hebrew Scriptures. The prohibition against idol worship is properly understood as a prohibition against the worship of false idols, not against idolatry in and of itself. Of course according to the Tanakh the idol that Israel worshipped was not a material object but instead a symbol of the living God. Nevertheless Panikkar cautions that simply because the God of Israel was Truth itself "made no difference to the character of the relationship that he had with his people."¹⁵ The God of Israel fights other gods, lives in a temple, and so on. It is only the Lord's similarity to other false idols that enables religious competition between Israel's God and other deities, since "rivalry does not come into existence except between realities of the same order."¹⁶ Christianity has overlooked this iconolatrous background with disastrous results

¹⁰ See Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*.

¹¹ Panikkar, *The Trinity and the Religious Experience of Man*, xiii.

¹² Ibid., 13.

¹³ Ibid., 15: "The icon stands for the homogeneity which subsists between God and his creature."

¹⁴ Ibid., 13.

¹⁵ Ibid., 12.

¹⁶ Ibid.

for its encounter with other religions, including Hinduism. Krishna warns Arjuna in the third chapter of the *Bhagavad Gita*:

A man cannot escape the force
of action by abstaining from actions;
he does not attain success
just by renunciation.¹⁷

In other words, according to Krishna a person must be iconolatrous. There is no escaping ritual, because ritual is constitutive of human life.¹⁸

Panikkar calls iconolatry the salvific path of *karmamarga*—the way of action, sacrifices, rites, and the like—which he defined as a constitutive element in the anthropomorphic phase of religious orthodoxies in various religious traditions.¹⁹ Participants who pursue this path interpret religious belonging as belonging in opposition to a sacralized image. To belong to a religion in the path of *karmamarga* is to embrace a conception of self as different from and surpassed by God, to worship a transcendent God who tells Isaiah “My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways” (Is 55:8 NRSV), or who proclaims to Moses, “You cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live” (Ex 33:20 NRSV).

This path, however, is only one of the three spiritual archetypes. A trinitarian theology transcends this conception of religious belonging without denying it. Jesus of Nazareth heralded the downfall of a predominantly iconolatrous belonging. When his followers first claimed that he was begotten by God, and later claimed that he was equal to God, this encounter with Jesus forced those who insisted upon an undifferentiated monotheism to choose between Jesus and the God of Israel. Confronted with this choice, some religious leaders of Jesus’ day chose the God of Israel, and Jesus was delivered to the Roman authorities for crucifixion. After his disciples’ subsequent faith in his resurrection, for many Jesus replaced the God of Israel as the new monotheistic idol. Panikkar claims: “For a great number of christians the Trinity became simply a highly abstract notion and for them God remained the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the great Idol whom it behooves us to worship, to appease, to please and to obey.”²⁰ This is not the whole story, however, and Jesus’ life provided an entry into the second phase of human spirituality and a new definition of religious belonging.

Loving the Son or Anthropological Belonging

For those early Christians who made the crucial distinction between the God of Israel and Jesus of Nazareth, the claim that humanity and God were joined in the person of Jesus induced an inevitable spiritual transformation. The ancient cosmo-anthropomorphism was changed into an experience founded on the idea of person; this new experience is personalism, in which religious belonging is defined by entering into a personal relationship with God, to use the phrase made numinous in American evangelical culture. Panikkar describes the more symmetrical divine-human relationship introduced by personalism as follows:

In religious personalism, obedience . . . is no longer, as in iconolatry, unconditional submission but the acknowledgement of God’s right to command. Love is no longer the outburst of spontaneous affection or unconscious ecstasy but a mutual giving. Worship is no longer annihilation of the self before the Absolute but the voluntary affirmation of his sovereignty. Sin is no longer cosmic transgression but a refusal to love.²¹

Christianity has become so tied to personalism that it is now extremely difficult to conceive of Christian belonging without it. Without an experience of God as a person, how could one know Christ?

¹⁷ *Bhagavad Gita* [3.4], 41.

¹⁸ For Panikkar’s program for ritual renewal in a post-religious age, see his *Worship and Secular Man*.

¹⁹ See Panikkar, *Trinity and the Religious Experience of Man*, 16-17.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 21.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 22.

Panikkar calls personalism the salvific path of *bhaktimarga*—the way of love.²² We find it in the Gospel of John's farewell discourse when Jesus tells his disciples, "You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father" (Jn 15:14-15 NRSV). We find the way of love in the *Gita* when Krishna commands Arjuna:

Keep me in your mind and devotion,
sacrifice to me, bow to me,
discipline yourself towards me,
and you will reach me!²³

Like iconolatry, personalism is an inherent dimension of all religion because religion is necessarily located within the experience of human beings. Nevertheless Panikkar maintains that personalism too does not exhaust the ways of religious belonging. Furthermore, personalism also runs risks. Idolatry haunts iconolatry, and anthropomorphism haunts personalism, insofar as a personalist spirituality refuses to give up the modicum of selfhood necessary to maintain a relationship connecting the lover and the beloved. In other words, a moment of crisis is reached in which an existential decision has to be made: should the lover insist upon distinction from the beloved in order to maintain a relationship, or does union with the beloved demand that the ego of the lover be vanquished? In Panikkar's recounting, personalism introduced a degree of mutuality into religious experience that was lacking in iconolatrous spirituality, but now the challenge is to question the value of personhood itself. Panikkar writes:

Love demands the renouncement of self, but when this renunciation is total, has not the object of love disappeared and has not love itself vanished in this disappearance? . . . By refusing to renounce love, which fusion with the Beloved would cause to disappear, one kills love itself, for in order to be capable of continuing reciprocal love one must at all costs maintain separation and distance, which are the indispensable conditions for mutual love.²⁴

Love seeks its own downfall. What one has here is a parallel to Søren Kierkegaard's absolute paradox, of which Kierkegaard wrote, "the ultimate potentiation of every passion is always to will its downfall, and so it is also the ultimate passion of the understanding to will the collision, although in one way or another the collision must become its downfall."²⁵ In Kierkegaard's philosophy, the paradox of thought is "to want to discover something that thought itself cannot think," and in Kierkegaard's exposition what holds true for the understanding is also true for love.²⁶ The lover longs to love someone, to collide with another, who will put an end to the experience of the lover's isolation, even if this means that the lover is transformed beyond all self-recognition. Those who have been in romantic love will recognize the dynamic that Kierkegaard describes: love for another destabilizes our self-sufficiency in an experience that can jolt us out of our familiar patterns of life, introduces a feeling of dependency, and induces us to seek for a union in which our spiritual neediness can be overcome. That union, however, entails leaving the former supposedly autarchic self behind. For Kierkegaard, "the lover is changed by this paradox of love so that he almost does not recognize himself anymore."²⁷ In this manner, the follower of *bhakti-marga* sacrifices love for communion with the beloved; Arjuna wants to be one with Krishna, even if this means Arjuna's own obliteration as a separate person. Phrased differently, religious belonging that is understood in personalist or anthropomorphic terms cannot abide the separation between self and other, and seeks another way of belonging, even at the cost of self-sacrifice.

²² See *ibid.*, 23.

²³ *Bhagavad Gita* [9.34], 87.

²⁴ Panikkar, *Trinity and the Religious Experience of Man*, 24.

²⁵ Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 37.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 39.

Communion in the Spirit or Immanent Belonging

In delineating a third genre of religious belonging Panikkar acknowledges this form of spirituality is for the most part foreign to Christianity. For Christians to embrace a non-dualistic or *advaita* belonging in which the worshipper and the one worshipped are no longer experienced as separate realities, they will have to pass beyond both the iconolatrous stage of religious belonging inherited from Israel and the personalist phase of religious belonging defined by Greco-Roman Christianity. It is insufficient to define God as an object over and against oneself. Nor is it enough to love God in the person of Jesus Christ. Panikkar notes: “If God is a person he corresponds very poorly to man’s own ideal of a person. Does he not show up too often as a father who is indifferent to evil and who seems to rejoice in the suffering of his children?”²⁸ We know Job discovered that the impossibility of having a dialogue with God undercut the idea that God could be understood as a person without qualification.

For those who find that a personalist God appears ineffective in the face of natural catastrophes and human injustice, Christianity can learn from Hinduism, which does not depend on an exclusively personalist conception of divinity. God is not a sovereign in the Upanishads who speaks and gives commands to people. Instead *Brahman* appears as spirit. Rather than constructing its ideal of spiritual belonging around human response and acceptance vis-à-vis a deity, the schools of Vedanta in which Panikkar is especially interested seek knowledge. Advaita spirituality is the path of knowledge, of *jnana-marga*, and specifically the knowledge that redefines self and other, as Arjuna learns from Krishna:

Arjuna, know that anything
Inanimate or alive with motion
is born from the union
of the field and its knower.²⁹

Advaita does not worship a God who is totally transcendent, totally other, but who exists within the spirit who is being. In order to know one has to learn, not simply worship or love. Advaita realizes that to commune with transcendence one has to travel via immanence. Panikkar writes, “Divine immanence is founded upon divine transcendence and *vice versa*.”³⁰ For divine immanence to be possible, God cannot simply be a person with whom one belongs in a relationship, because this would still involve experiencing God solely as other, as an object over against oneself. Panikkar even denies that Augustine’s description of God as *intimior intimo meo*, more interior than my interiority, is sufficient to bridge the gap between divine personhood and divine immanence. For Augustine, God dwells within the soul but is still very much other.³¹ Nevertheless Panikkar is unwilling to abandon divine transcendence, because some kind of I-thou relationship must be present for relationality to persist; otherwise all reality collapses into an undifferentiated monism. Advaita for Panikkar is a non-dualist understanding of reality, but one that does not harden into a conceptual monism in which all distinctions are meaningless. In his Gifford Lectures, Panikkar blames this misconception of advaita on a Western propensity for dialectical approaches to reality.³²

With his call to supplement Christian theology with advaita belonging, Panikkar opens the door for one to embrace an interreligious belonging by transcending traditional markers of religious identity. “Faith in the Spirit cannot be clothed in personalist structures,” notes Panikkar in defending advaita.³³ Christian spirituality must take account of *jnana-marga* and embrace a new way of religious belonging, an experience that has not found adequate theological expression in Christian history. Panikkar writes,

²⁸ Panikkar, *Trinity and the Religious Experience of Man*, 27-28.

²⁹ *Bhagavad Gita* [13.26], 118.

³⁰ Panikkar, *Trinity and the Religious Experience of Man*, 31

³¹ See *ibid.*, 32.

³² See Panikkar, *The Rhythm of Being*, 216–24.

³³ Panikkar, *Trinity and the Religious Experience of Man*, 64.

'In the beginning was the Logos' the *New Testament* affirms. 'At the end will be the *atman*' adds the wisdom of this *cosmic* Testament to the canon that is not yet closed. The *end* of every individual is the recognition that this *atman* is identical with *brahman*. Man finds himself, as it were, under the arc which stretches between the transcendent God and the immanent Divinity. . . . there is no longer any *me* to save, for one has grasped that there is an I who calls one by a new and completely hidden name.³⁴

One does not discover the Spirit or dialogue with it. The trans-personal reality that is the Trinity encompasses the human person and induces a corresponding trans-personal belonging.

Readers of Panikkar should note that this new I that results is not a new ego. If this were so then the advaitic spirituality Panikkar advocates would be nothing more than a crass metempsychosis in which one could sit down and recollect one's past lives under the guidance of a therapist, guru, or publicist. Those who boast of their supposed reincarnations in this manner appear to be unaware that—in the classic formulation of the relationship between *karma*, *samsara* (wandering), and *moksha* (liberation)—reincarnation is something one should try to escape rather than to celebrate. Boasting that one's past ego has been buried under a succession of previous lives is a common popular misapplication of the doctrine of *karma*. This new Self that emerges from escaping the karmic cycle of rebirth is the Absolute, the transcendent Father, experienced through the Logos rather than a famous celebrity from a bygone era. In other words, a practitioner of advaitic spirituality recognizes that his or her new I is simultaneously God's thou.

In this understanding, humanity's goal is to be divinized in the Spirit, not to turn Jesus of Nazareth into a focal point for idolatry.³⁵ Belonging to the divine in a personalist relationship serves as the point of departure by which one reaches a transhuman experience.³⁶ The Panikkarian reformulation of what the ancient Greek Church fathers called *theosis*, of divinization, can only come about if the human person surrenders its own conception of personhood. *Theosis* is recognition of the infinite capacity of humanity to transcend particularized religious identities and so belong in different ways to, with, and in God.

In *Myth, Faith and Hermeneutics* Panikkar tried to offer more than a negative solution to the problem of the proper balance between the paths of knowledge and devotion. Often in Hindu traditions, advocates of the path of *advaita* have considered the path of *bhakti* as a way that is spiritually efficacious for those who are not as enlightened as the *advaitin*. *Bhakti* in this view is a path that is not spiritually normative for all persons. Panikkar is dissatisfied with this traditional solution, and describes a conversation with a Hindu dialogue partner who told of a monk who realized that *brahman* is love.³⁷ At this point, however, a pressing issue for Christians that emerged earlier reappears—does not love seek its own obliteration? After all, love implies distance between the lover and the beloved, between humanity and God, but *advaita* seeks to erase this distance. Love demands particularity, and Panikkar holds: "It seems that the genuine experience of human love is not satisfied with involvement with the other as other in a general sense—in which the other is ultimately reduced to the self—but that it needs the other as a *particular* other, personal and unrepeatable."³⁸

The *advaitin* can love anything, but can such love be real without introducing qualifications into the *advaita* worldview? Panikkar turns his back on a monistic understanding of Vedanta in order to create a space for love, but tries to avoid relapsing into a dualism incompatible with *advaita*. If the above-mentioned *sadhu* is right in claiming that *brahman* is love, then one may introduce *bhakti-marga* into the Upanishadic *tat tvam asi* (thou art that) experience. Panikkar attempts this in a complex passage explaining the cosmotheandric experience, writing:

In this Thou the I discovers itself, and really is it. The Thou is the consciousness that the I not only has but is. . . . This I knows Himself, but His Knowledge is none other than the Knower. However, the Knowledge has come to be because the Knower has come out of Himself, as it were, has 'loved' that which by loving He knows to be His (own) knowledge, Himself

³⁴ Ibid. Emphases in original

³⁵ See *ibid.*, 63, 72; Panikkar, *Myth, Faith, and Hermeneutics*, 206.

³⁶ See Panikkar, *Trinity and the Religious Experience of Man*, 72.

³⁷ See Panikkar, *Myth, Faith, and Hermeneutics*, 278–89.

³⁸ Ibid., 280.

as known by Himself. He could not know even Himself were He not driven out, or did He not 'despoil' Himself, only to recover Himself immediately in the person, in which He has fully invested Himself. This total gift of Himself is love.³⁹

In this experience the tension between *bhakti* and *jnana* dissipates. One can admit *atman* is *brahman*, and also say with Panikkar: "Things are nothing if not crystallizations of divine Love. A thing is not only insofar as it is loved; it is that very love itself. In itself it is nothing."⁴⁰

This conception of love Panikkar calls "*advaitic* love." It is love that can sustain particularity in religious belonging without falling into dualism. Where is personalism in this approach? Panikkar suggests one look to the Trinity for an answer. If the Father is the supreme I and generates the Son as the Thou, then the Spirit is not simply both the Love of the Father and the reciprocal self-gift of the Logos. The Spirit is the nonduality of Father and Son. *Advaita* rescues the Trinity from tritheism, from a conception of personhood that is individualist. The Trinity demonstrates how devotion and knowledge can co-exist, how divine personhood and divine immanence can co-exist. Within the Trinity there is space for love without separation, because the Trinity is one without a second. Ewert Cousins labels this formulation Panikkar's "*advaitic trinitarianism*."⁴¹ For Christians, *theosis* is the experience of entering into this *advaitic* love, into the experience where one's person is transformed into the thou of others.

To love one's neighbor as oneself means the neighbor can no longer be seen as one's other, in opposition to one's self. As Panikkar notes:

Understanding my neighbor means understanding him as he understands himself, which can be done only if I rise above the subject-object dichotomy, cease to know him as an object and come to know him as myself. Only if there exists a Self in which we communicate does it become possible to know and love another as Oneself.⁴²

In this trinitarian mystery one is no longer imprisoned within the old self but belongs as the thou of the other, just as the Son belongs as the thou of the Father.

Understanding Theology Without Walls in Light of Panikkar's Advaitic Trinitarianism

This summary of Panikkar's interreligious trinitarian theology has already provoked questions from various quarters. Jacques Dupuis criticized Panikkar's radical distinction between Jesus and the Logos.⁴³ Rowan Williams argued against Panikkar's idea of the "myth of history," which Panikkar employed to relativize historicist understandings of scriptures, traditions, and scholarship.⁴⁴ Keith Johnson rejects Panikkar's trinitarian theology on the grounds that it is incompatible with patristic doctrine, a critique that would not trouble Panikkar, who thinks that patristic orthodoxy needs updating in the modern era.⁴⁵ Most importantly, Panikkar's sweeping link between Judaism and iconolatrous spirituality cannot be left unanswered. When he claims that "the Israelites were experienced idolaters," this needs to be severely questioned by those who know the way in which criticisms of Jewish monotheism and its supposed intolerance relative to other traditions have influenced some histories of comparative religion that operate in a Christian supersessionist manner, whether this is explicitly recognized or not.⁴⁶

³⁹ Ibid., 282–83.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 283.

⁴¹ See Ewert H. Cousins, "Panikkar's Advaitic Trinitarianism," 119–30.

⁴² Panikkar, *The Intrareligious Dialogue*, 11.

⁴³ See Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, 149–53.

⁴⁴ See Williams, "Trinity and Pluralism," 3–15; also, MacPherson, *A Critical Reading of the Development of Raimon Panikkar's Thought on the Trinity*.

⁴⁵ See Johnson, *Rethinking the Trinity and Religious Pluralism*.

⁴⁶ Panikkar, *Trinity and the Religious Experience of Man*, 13. For the historical background to modern Hindu-Jewish dialogue, see the essays by Sinha and Katz in *Indo-Judaic Studies in the Twenty-First Century*, 93–126.

Criticisms like these generally emerge from those who find Panikkar wanting from the standpoint of his compatibility with Christian tradition, but that is not a defining issue for Theology without Walls. What does Panikkar's trinitarian theology provide for the TWW project? One special value of Panikkar's sizable oeuvre is that it should prod us to question what religious belonging means, for until that question is answered, we cannot hope to begin to understand what multiple religious belonging means.

The current landscape in religious studies and theology brings no consensus to the issue of religious belonging. In *The Churching of America* Roger Finke and Rodney Stark transformed our conception of American religious history by examining census data of church membership.⁴⁷ Such institutional affiliation provides one tangible way to answer the question, "Who belongs to a church?" In the 1960s, Karl Rahner coined the phrase "anonymous Christian" to describe those who belong to the salvific plan of Jesus Christ without knowing it, but Rahner's project was primarily designed for Christians who wanted to make sense of religious others and who wanted some guidance in thinking about the possibilities of salvation outside the Church in a globalized world.⁴⁸ Rahner's transforming exposition provided a less tangible answer to the question, "Who is a Christian?" Each of these ways of answering the question, "Who belongs?" provoked spirited criticism. Scholars who objected to the market model of Finke and Stark found it reductionist for treating churches as quasi-corporations competing for a greater market share among spiritual consumers.⁴⁹ Rahner's "anonymous Christianity" was attacked as enervating the superiority of explicitly affirmed Christian belief.⁵⁰ Neither of these markers of religious adherence accounts for the experiences of those who do not identify with a single tradition but who draw upon religious traditions episodically but sincerely in their own lives.

If we listen to Panikkar, we can recognize that his trinitarian theology changes the terms of the debate. Religious belonging, for Panikkar, is always a multivalent phrase. In his trinitarian theology, Christians (and Hindus) never belong to a tradition in simply one way. Before God the Father, Christians belong to a God who is completely transcendent. Loving the Son, they belong in friendship with another human being. Praying and belonging within the Spirit, Christians are divinized by immanent grace. Panikkar's theology of trinitarian belonging, with its claim that one must lose one's personal identity in order to regain it in God, is new and yet finds an echo in the First Letter of John, in a passage where the biblical author also appeals to the need for faith in the possibility of a new self, writing, "Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is" (1 Jn 3:2 NRSV). Over the course of his long career, I think Panikkar's most significant achievement is his recognition that the ultimate justification for multiple religious belonging is neither a demand made by contemporary scholars in light of modern pluralism, nor recognition by postmodernism of the inevitable limitations of human knowledge. Rather, multiple religious belonging beyond the walls of particular traditions can be justified because it mirrors a cosmotheandric paradox that can be formulated as the mystery of three persons existing as one God.

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⁴⁷ See Finke and Stark, *The Churching of America*.

⁴⁸ See Rahner, "Anonymous Christians," 390–98; "Observations on the Problem of the 'Anonymous Christian'," 280–98.

⁴⁹ See Stark and Bainbridge, *A Theory of Religion*; Johnson, "From Religious Markets to Religious Communities," 325–40; Jerolmack and Porpora, "Religion, Rationality, and Experience," 140–60.

⁵⁰ The criticism against Rahner's position was led by de Lubac and von Balthasar. See Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, 143–49 for a summary of the debate in the late 1960s.

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