

Pluralism and Oppression

THEOLOGY IN WORLD PERSPECTIVE

*R. Panikkar, T. Berry, J. Sobrino,
E. Dussel, and Others*

EDITED BY

Paul F. Knitter



THE ANNUAL PUBLICATION OF THE
COLLEGE THEOLOGY SOCIETY

1988

VOLUME 34



Lanham • New York



Annual Publication • 34

CAN THEOLOGY BE TRANSCULTURAL?

Raimon Panikkar

Our question is *new, biased, Christian, and legitimate*.

It is *new* because it entails a degree of historical reflection, critical self-introspection, academic scholarship, and secondary literature not available in other periods of Christian history. Manichaeism, for instance, had a crosscultural expansion for centuries and reached Taoism, Amidism, and other religions, but the question was never raised whether Manichaeism had a transcultural value.¹

Our question is *biased*, because it assumes a particular understanding of theology and of religion which gives rise to our question about a transcultural theology. Seen from the outside, the primordial African religions, for instance, present a sort of common "religious negritude" which may lead one to ask about their transcultural values; but in fact, Africans did not ask this question—until timidly, in modern times, under Christian influence.

Our question is *Christian*, because of a kind of unformulated

Raimon Panikkar, Professor Emeritus (Religious Studies) of the University of California, Santa Barbara, studied chemistry, philosophy and theology in Spain, Germany, Italy, and India. Ordained a Catholic priest since 1946, he was a member of the first liturgical commission for Vatican II (under Cardinal Lercaro) and of the first Roman Synod during the Pontificate of John XXIII. He is General Editor of the *Indic Theological Monographs of the Indian Theological Association* and author of a *Manifesto for a "Hindu-Christian Theology"* (Jevadhara, 1979). He is also President of INODEP International (Institut Occuménique pour le Développement des Peuples). Paris. He has published 29 books and around 300 major articles dealing with philosophy of science, metaphysics, comparative religions, theology of religion(s), and indology. Among his recent books are *Myth, Faith, and Hermeneutics* (Paulist, 1979), *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism* (Orbis, 1981), *Blessed Simplicity* (Seabury, 1982; Harper & Row, distributors), *The Silence of God* (Orbis, 1989).

expectation that there is a unique and "providential" proof that Christianity is, in some sense, above cultures.

Finally, our question is *legitimate*, for although it suggests a positive answer and evinces intellectual and vested interests, nothing prevents us from coming up with a qualified answer or even a plain no.

The Second Person of the Trinity, to use traditional language, "became" incarnated in Jesus of Nazareth, but Jesus himself never questioned whether he should or could have been born elsewhere and "elsewhen." He was the "son of Mary" and the "Son of Man." Only later did the early Christians introduce the idea of the "fullness of times" and the centrality of space (Israel, Jerusalem, Rome . . .). Likewise, Christian experience became incarnated in the surrounding cultural milieu, and so theology was born. But theology did not question whether its *theologumena* also made sense to peoples of other cultures. Later Christians reflected on their formulations and came to consider them the last word in space and time. When confronted with other cultural patterns, Christians used to speak about scandal and folly, rather than admit that Christian theology is the fruit of this tacit cultural dialogue. The dialogue was called, of course, refutation or apologetics.

I am oversimplifying the picture, for there were some thinkers well aware of the implicit dialogue. Nevertheless the situation of dialogue was hardly reflected upon in an explicit manner. In other words, the classical way in which Christian theology has moved through the centuries has been, by and large, as if theology were non-temporal and non-spatial, as if time and space were not theological categories. The troubling idea of a possible development of dogma emerged only in the last century. Still today, hardly any theologian dares speak of the *mutation of dogma*; most of them talk only of *development*. *Aggiornamento* is all right, *retractatio* is abhorrent, and *mutation*, unthinkable. *Quod semper et ubique* has been a Christian slogan.² *Eppur si muove!* Only recently, and quite timidly, has the sociology of knowledge begun to enter the awareness of Christian theologians.

Throughout history, official documents of the churches hardly acknowledged the spatio-temporal boundaries of their statements. Truth was considered to be atemporal. What was valid for Constantinople was considered valid for the entire world; pontifical documents inciting witch-hunting and justifying the torture of heretics have never been withdrawn. It all looked as if the theological enter-

prise were truly for a world without end. Implicit was the assumption that theological activity was somehow above the cultural mutability of purely human affairs.³ Theology was considered to be above culture.

Let me make this point clear. Nobody would deny that sound theological activity requires a critical mind, a sensitive heart, and an acute power of reflection. The question under discussion is whether such theological activity is tied to a particular type of culture, whether to receive, understand, reflect upon the Christian fact—and even to believe in it—we need to belong to a particular culture or set of cultures. Is theology a transcultural value? Ultimately we have to ask whether the "christic fact" is not already a cultural fact.

Nor will anyone deny that every human statement is clad in temporal fashions and spatial features. Our question asks whether Christ "in a fashion which transcends the wisdom of all his interpreters"⁴ has a universal message independent of all cultures. Yet our problem goes even deeper, for it must ask who or what is this Christ beyond and above interpretations. Or, from a less Protestant and more Catholic perspective, the question concerns the so-called substantial and thus, immutable and perennial, core of a divinely revealed depositum *fidei*.

Let me put it in an Asian way: What is the peculiar core which transmigrates from culture to culture and is born again and again in different forms? Is Swahili theology a reincarnation of Greek theology? Is the *karma* of John Sobrino a reincarnation of Cyril of Alexandria or, perhaps, Joachim of Fiore? In other words, how does the law of *karma* function in theology?

We shall distinguish three types of answers. I am fully conscious that there is no neutral viewpoint in matters religious and cultural. My perspective is based on the simple observation that there have been Christians throughout the ages who have interpreted themselves or their context in a threefold manner.

I. The Supracultural Claim

A certain type of Christian reflection claims to be above any culture, even though at times it shuns the very word theology. Karl Barth and Pius XII can serve as examples. The Christian message is supernatural; Christian revelation is the judgement on all religions; Christianity rightly understood stands above all cultural construc-

tions of humanity. The church is the eschatological and supernatural human family: *signum levatum inter nationes* (Vatican I), *sacramentum mundi* (Vatican II). While religion and culture are human constructs, Christian faith is godly; it is not the human effort to ascend to the divine, but the fruit of the descent of the divine itself, as it has pleased God to manifest God's self to the world.

Contemporary questions about inculturation, adaptation, indigenization and the like often assume that the Christian fact stands above all cultural diversities and thus has a right of citizenship among all the cultures of the world. Christianity stands above all cultures and can be incarnated in any of them. When in such incarnation something is left behind or rejected, this very fact is taken to prove that the discarded doctrine or custom was not fully human. "The Church rejects nothing of all that is valuable and good in any culture and religion." This is a Christian attitude, at least fifteen centuries old, and repeated in unequivocal terms in the Second Vatican Council and in statements of the World Council of Churches.

To be sure, the evangelist, missionary, or theologian is advised to reach that naked *kenosis*, that mystical core, that supernatural faith which can be incarnated in any human culture. The Christian event is seen as a supracultural fact; and if until now it has adopted and adapted a certain garb, this is due to historical contingencies and/or the predominance of a particular culture over others; but, in itself, *per se*, nothing stands in the way of its taking flesh in the most remote and, for the western taste, most exotic cultures.

For over thirty years I have been personally grappling with this problem after having been taught, for a previous thirty years, that the church, as a supernatural entity, could be at home everywhere. I do not doubt the intention—and even good intention—of such an attitude. I only detect a contradiction in the intent itself. I used to ask the question whether in order to be a Christian, one ought to be spiritually a Semite and, intellectually, a Westerner. My partners in dialogue would readily admit that we should not confuse the Mediterranean garb of Christianity with its transcendent, mystical and supracultural core. I agree.⁵ Indeed, my sympathies are for authentic mysticism. But neither religion in general, nor Christianity in particular, can be reduced to a formless, silent mystical core. The moment that the *muein* becomes conscious, and much more when it is translated into *legein*, it has to take names and forms (*nano* and *rupa*, the Indic traditions would say) that are no longer supracultural, but expressions of particular cultures. The standard response

is to say that we have to do here with a transcendental relation that takes particular shapes and forms in different cultures. This has also been my own position in particular contexts. But this answer works well only under one assumption and presents an intrinsic difficulty, or rather an inner contradiction if generalized crossculturally.

The assumption is what we can call the theistic myth proper to a limited set of cultures. It assumes in fact that it "has pleased God" to incarnate God's self in a particular culture and to make it the vehicle of a supracultural fact, imperfections of that culture notwithstanding. If there is a free and sovereign God, Creator of heaven and earth and Lord of history, nobody can prevent this God from doing or choosing whatever or whomever God wills. In other words, the christic event may be said to be supracultural, but the awareness of that event, let alone its interpretation, is far from being supracultural, for it assumes a set of beliefs that only make sense within a given cultural pattern. We can, therefore, speculate, as often has been done, that it is even providential that the Greeks came first, the Germanic tribes later, and the peoples of the East and of Africa will now "rejuvenate" and enliven Christianity. It is a legitimate thought and, at least since Tertullian, a factual one.⁶

But there is an intrinsic difficulty, which fast becomes a contradiction. Theology is said to be free to formulate, explain, and narrate the Christian event in the language of any culture. This works well as long as the picture of the new culture is somewhat homogeneous to and compatible with the picture of the older culture. But the conflict becomes irresponsible when this is not the case. The new interpretation, in fact, is rejected when it proves incompatible with the existing Christian tradition. But in this rejection, traditionally Christian criteria, of course, are used. This means that there seems to be a hidden agenda at work when the christic event is held up as sovereignly supracultural. The old pattern remains normative. Perhaps in an African milieu Christians might be allowed to celebrate the Eucharist and say "Pork of God" instead of "Lamb of God". There would be more resistance to permitting the Eucharist to be celebrated with tea and potatoes, or perhaps with "soma" alone. But can the christic event be culturally incarnated in a world in which there is no God as Supreme Being and no history as the scenario of revelation? Which supracultural criterion do we use to condemn all those "atheistic" and a-historical cultures, if not the criteria deduced from a particular interpretation of that allegedly supracultural mystery?

Where do we draw the line? I would argue that, until now, without a certain Semitic and Hellenic mind-set we are not even able to understand what Christianity is all about. The meaning of revelation, the notion of history, the idea of a personal God, and the like, are not even understandable without a particular *forma mentis*; such notions are not cultural invariants. Decades ago I called for the dekeyngmatization of Christ in order to free him from any dogmatic proclamation.⁷ Today I would ask whether we have to also dehistoricize him.

The only coherent answer is one which renounces any claim of being above all culture and instead speaks of the scandal of concreteness and the challenge of the historical Christian revelation. We were all Gentiles and had to bow before the historical facts of a God incarnate. This leads already to the second option.

II. The Supercultural Claim

Let us then be humbly audacious and not be afraid to call things by their proper names. It is not true that theology is a *logos* on God, above and beyond culture. The clear fact is that Christianity bears the seal of a historically precise and superior culture. Christ may have been born poor, but he belonged to a refined and old culture. He was even of a royal family. He was a *kshatriya*. Christian revelation makes no sense in an uncultured climate, or in a "primitive" civilization. It requires a certain type of culture, a particular understanding of human history, a refinement of civilization. Within a certain human development there are, indeed, many possibilities, and there is no difficulty in accepting different cultural garbs to express the core of the christic fact; but this requires a certain degree of evolution—a superior culture that has transcended the inferior stages of human civilization. The old so-called "indirect methods" of evangelizing, which the French often baptized with the euphemism of "*évangélisation de base*," were based on this idea of preparing the ground by first civilizing the natives so that they could at least grasp what the missionaries were going to preach.⁸

Even though Christianity did not descend from heaven, chemically-pure and supranatural, it does belong to a superior culture and can become inculturated only among people with a certain amount of cultural sophistication. It presupposes a particular understanding of humanity. The first Christian missionaries in Korea had first to convince the natives that the human being is a sinner in order to

preach redemption to them. We may not (yet?) ask whether we can understand the Bible without computer-language; but without a written culture, what we call Christianity today would make little sense. The human race is evolving, and Christianity belongs to the superior strata of that evolution. According to Scripture, the christic event took place at the end of times. We can understand, therefore, why the West today dominates the world and why western culture has spread all over the planet.⁹ We may discuss how important a Plato or a Shankara are for theology; but with a Siberian shaman, there is not much we can do. In fact, we don't have to be romantics to recognize that today all the peoples of the world are trying to imitate the West and are thereby accepting more or less uncritically Christian infrastructures.

As much as we may abhor apartheid, we practice it theologically under other names and more subtle attitudes. The option for the poor and the Sermon on the Mount give ample food for thought and material for preaching, but their demands are taken only so far. The lilies of the fields are fine, but we don't know what to do with the weeds and tares. What place can they have in the Kingdom? Bismark was more sincere than many a theologian when he said that with the Sermon on the Mount one cannot run an Empire. After all, the Christian crusaders, conquerors, kings, and merchants also brought a higher form of civilization. The cross was accompanied by the menace of the sword, but was then followed by the "blessings" of the machine. It is all very intertwined.

Where do we draw the line? We all have a particular idea of humanness and humanization. Christian theology belongs to the higher echelons. *De catechizandis rudibus!* wrote St. Augustine in the year 400. Can everybody belong to the "World Church"? Can the culturally poor, "savages," prostitutes, primitives? Where are our *loci theologici*? Only among the "developed" countries? Or, perhaps, also among peoples on the "way to development"—but not among those who resist being "civilized"? Can one "christianize" without civilizing?

To be sure, theology as a conscious activity and critical reflection entails a certain degree of intellectual power. But does this require us also to assume a hierarchical view of cultures, or to speak about theology in an elitist manner which screens the raw materials suited for theology to make sure they are not too raw?

De facto, Christian theology, from the last millennium up to our times, has been linked with a certain complex of cultural superior-

ity. This, however, was not always so—as we realize when we read Augustine between the lines and discover his nostalgia for the superior civilization of pagan Rome, or when we listen to the emperor Julian and feel his scorn at the lack of culture among Christians. We learn that Christians were by no means a cultural elite when we read Celsus, or study the centuries of “barbarian” theology, or listen to Nietzsche, or sit at the feet of some Vedantic master ridiculing the rough mentality of Christian missionaries. Wassilij Rozanov (1856–1919), that genial philosopher of religion, once said that western Christianity did pay heed to the words of Christ, but never took interest in looking at his face.¹⁰ Besides his words (in Scripture), Christ has left us an icon of life.

Yet today, can we really defend a theology not linked with a certain degree of human sophistication?

Without going to extremes, we can say that the reaction against “academic” or “sitting theology” is healthy. Furthermore, we need not only contemplative theology, or a “kneeling theology.” (H. Urs Von Balthasar), but an active and practical theology. Even more, we need a theology in which both *logos* and *theos* once again mean “word” and “mystery.” We have only to listen today to the cries of the so-called “tribals” in India, or the accounts of so many witnesses all over Africa, to realize the burdens of our doctrinal superstructures and the limits of our historical interpretations of the christic event—as if history were synonymous with reality. And so we have forgotten that theology is not for theologians but for the people.¹¹ Are we going to disqualify the so-called “theology of liberation”—better called “theology of life and death”¹²—because it does not fit into our academic theological language or does not use “scientific” methodology?

I submit that doing theology in culturally diverse worlds today demands a *kenosis* and a mystical insight which does not require belief in a superior culture.

Yet each period in time and each community in space draws the line on cultural requirements at different levels. Paul drew his bottom line by maintaining that at least one should be able first to understand, and then to believe, that there is one remunerator God. Others have been more strict, and others are prepared to be more generous.

To offer some extreme but telling examples: for some centuries the “native” peoples from Asia and Africa were not considered fit to become priests, let alone bishops in the Catholic Church. A native

church was therefore simply not possible. Today the same church considers African polygamy incompatible with Christian ethics—but it has no major problems with atomic weaponry. In Roman Catholic theological circles in India, the stiff prohibition of *communicatio in sacris* is breaking down, and a Hindu-Christian theology is developing that would have been viewed as utterly impossible some half a century ago.¹³ The line is movable, although each particular community in time and space draws it differently.¹⁴ There may be a minimum of cultural sophistication, but this minimum is fluid. We cannot prove a priori that theology requires an objectively superior culture.

So let us examine the third possible option.

III. The Crosscultural Claim

We have seen that theology, because of its *logos* component, cannot logically claim to be above all cultures—that is, supracultural. Each culture has its proper *logos*, and every *logos* is housed in a culture. Each language is culturally bound. A possible *meta-logos* can only be a *dia-logos*, which creates a new language, a new culture, but it is not supracultural.

Because of its *theos* component, theology cannot consistently claim that it needs to belong to a superior culture—that is, supercultural. The divine is divine for all. “God is no respecter of persons” (Acts 10:34). The notion of a private Godhead makes no sense. God, in many traditions, is a proper name. But the very notion of God has a certain universal claim. God is, ultimately, a common name. To speak meaningfully about Dante or entropy requires a superior culture. To speak about God cannot have the same cultural restrictions.

Yet, *de facto*, and I shall argue also *de jure*, the theological activity has crossed cultural boundaries in the past, and is doing so presently, without necessarily having to indulge in cultural imperialism—difficult as that may sometimes be.¹⁵ The crosscultural claim is justified. Culture is the house, not the prison of the human being.

I am purposefully using variations of one single word—*supra*, *super*, and *crosscultural*—in order to stress distinctions but not separation. So I am proposing the following assertions: First, anything human *qua* human belongs to the order of nature, and, as such, is somehow *beyond* culture. (I say “somehow” to guard against overstressing the polarity between nature-culture, for *logos* is also

PLURALISM AND OPPRESSION

rooted in nature). So there is a supracultural element in theology—something belonging to the human being.

Second, anything which is not given by nature, and is tied to an historical and datable event, is somehow *different* from other forms of human existence, and, as such, is somewhat above certain cultural reflexive notion of the divine implies a cultural achievement.) In this sense, there is a supracultural element in theology—as a human perfection.

Third, anything which legitimately has not tied itself to a particular way of life and has claimed to be a message for the *anawin*, for the poor representing the non-specialized and not particularly cultured human beings, transcends the boundaries of one particular culture and can be called crosscultural. In that sense there is a crosscultural element in theology as a human activity not tied to a particular human group.

May I ask the indulgence of "scientific" exegetes and interpret in a nonfinancial way a sentence of Brother Jesus defending a woman?¹⁶ "You have the poor among you always." (Mark 14:7) This interest for the poor, paradoxically enough, justifies the crosscultural value of Christian theology. The poor are precisely those who have not "made it" in any culture; they remain at the bottom-line. They are undifferentiated, not culturally specialized. They are crosscultural, for they are found in all cultures. Concern for brahmins or rabbis, scientists or saints, white people or only free citizens requires certain cultural options, but concern for the poor demands a crosscultural attitude. The poor are always with us, in every culture. The *anba-arez*, "the people of the land," are part of agriculture more than of human culture.

In short, what is the meaning of crosscultural theology?

We have discarded the universalistic claims of a Christian theology (to have a value above and therefore for every other culture). In spite of past theological explanations, this attitude today smacks of philosophical immaturity and theological colonialism.

We have also discarded the superiority claim on paradoxically the same grounds that Christian tradition refuted Pelagianism and Semi-pelagianism: it would make the understanding and acceptance of the christic event dependent on "nature" (which we could translate "culture")—that is, on something which conditions the Christian experience *ab extra* and renders it dependent on something outside of itself.

THEOLOGY IN A CULTURALLY DIVERSE WORLD

And yet we have also acknowledged that both attitudes cannot be totally excluded from Christian self-understanding.

I am aware that the theological task consists not in exposing private opinions, but in presenting the inherent polarity of Christian theology. Theology must be public, critical, and concerned with orthopraxis as much as with orthodoxy. In other words, Christian theologians want to be loyal both to the understanding of the christic event as disclosed to their own experience (which is always inserted in contemporary awareness) and to be unfolding of traditional, collective self-identity. The first condition entails, besides an obvious personal honesty, an openness to and recognition of the novum of our times. The second condition demands a reflective consciousness that attempts to articulate a plausible understanding of tradition which transcends private opinions, though it would not claim any extrinsic authority besides the convincing force of its own arguments. The authentic theologian does not need an imprimatur from the powers that be, but does look for a sacramental blessing from the community. This sacrament is also the voice of the cosmos. There is no theology without cosmology.

If we want to keep the biblical image, the theologian is rather like a shepherd's dog which runs back and forth, sometimes getting ahead of the sheep and sometimes behind, barking, taking risks, making mistakes, the recipient of shouts and stones and a meager pittance—all this is part of its job of keeping the flock of the past in communion with that of the future. But a dog is loyal and asks no more.

This image mirrors our present-day situation. On the one hand, Christian theologians cannot ignore the traditional claim to universal validity—the famous or infamous "Totalitäts-" and "Absolutheitsanspruch". In one form or another, this claim is ingrained in Christian consciousness since the time of Jesus. Any authentic theology, while being a local theology limited by time and space, formulates at the same time something of the human condition that transcends local boundaries. The Christ-symbol has been constitutively linked—at least historically—with the alpha and omega of reality.

On the other hand, both the lessons of history and our present-day awareness make it impossible to overlook not only the dark side of such a totalitarian pretence, but also its sheer non-sense the moment it is formulated in whatever language.¹⁷ How can one single phylum of human culture absorb or concentrate all the others?¹⁸

I am pleading for the *via media*, not for the muddled way. To explain the past does not mean to justify it or to explain it away. It means to understand the grounds on which the past was standing and which led to formulate convictions in the way they have been transmitted to us.¹⁹ This hermeneutical rule, I suggest, applies not only to theology, but also to any interpretation of the past. If we take pains at interpreting the past, it is because we desire to understand a given situation, and, from there, to draw a deeper understanding of our situation.

In fact, Christians, children of their times as everybody else, did believe in the two positions which are for us no longer acceptable. I have elaborated *ad nauseam* that a new and deeper Christian self-identity may emerge if Christians give up those earlier claims and replace them with the crosscultural validity of the christic event. Neither exclusivism nor inclusivism is any longer convincing. Pluralism is the name of our third position.

This position is not the same kind of "strategic retreat" as is evident, still today, in the sad history of relations between modern science and Christian belief. It is, rather, an expression of healthy pluralism and the awareness of the relativity inherent in every human construct, act or position, including those activities allegedly performed in alliance with the divine.

In tune with such a healthy pluralism, and still within a genuinely historical and incarnational spirit, I propose the following crosscultural Christian principle: *The christic event has an inherent dynamism to take flesh wherever it can. This "can" is ambiguous, ambivalent, and not apodictic.*

It is ambiguous because it may lead in various directions, good and bad. It may lead to impositions, conquests, and exploitations as well as to fulfillment, enhancement of life, and true conversion. It is ambivalent, because it may have opposite results—it may pacify, purify, and perfect a culture on the one hand, or harden, blind, and even fanaticize that culture on the other. It is not apodictic because the incarnational impulse cannot have any justification *a priori*.²⁰ We become aware of this impulse insofar as we experience the christic event to be connected with the destiny of the human race and with the very dynamism of Being. We are both actors in and spectators of the selfsame display of Reality. Not only the fate of the earth, but also the very life of the universe, is something about which we share the glory, the burden, and the responsibility.

We could play further with the metaphor of the incarnation and

point out that the incarnation can take place only in a virgin's womb, in a poor milieu, and in a marginal culture, accompanied by astrological events. But there is no need to be allegorical. Theological incarnation is *de facto* not possible everywhere because Christian self-understanding in different time and space requires in each instance different conditions of possibility. Sometimes these conditions may not be present.

The same principle can be stated in a more positive light. It is the incarnational dynamism of the christic event itself, reenacted by its believers, that carries out such acts of inculturation. This is a delicate activity and Christians should be extremely careful not to repeat the cultural genocides of the past that resulted from their alliance with one particular culture.²¹ There is always the danger that the Christian dynamism can degenerate into a trick to gain power or increase numbers, or make "followers"!

It is evident, therefore, that the incarnational enterprise evinces the previously mentioned ambiguity and ambivalence and can become unethical and, I would add, unchristian. The internal dynamism I am speaking about, which incidentally is not exclusive to the christic event, can be related to the principle that goodness spreads by itself (*bonum diffusivum sui*), so that any strategy or device to "make it work," or even to "give testimony," makes it spurious and harmful. This was, incidentally, the advice of Mahatma Gandhi to Christians: to attract by the perfume of their virtues.²²

What I am saying is that there is a spontaneous fecundation among cultures, a positive osmosis among beliefs, a crosscultural enrichment that does not need to be an invasion of foreign goods, ideas, or people for the sake of profits, material or spiritual.

There is no blueprint for such a dynamism. It cannot be realized as an act of the conscious and external will (in order to gain some form of good). It has to emerge as a natural and spontaneous movement from an internal urge of the people concerned. An example of what I am talking about is the emerging Indic theology.²³ This theology is sprouting out of a double fidelity: to the religious traditions of the country and to Christian beliefs. Theologians are trying to harmonize the two traditions in which they live and believe. We are here at the antipodes of the "apologetics" attitude and even of the "mission" mentality—though I recognize that these terms are undergoing deep changes in meaning.

This implies another reading of the classical text with which "missions" traditionally have been justified: "Go and teach all

nations . . ." (Matt. 28:19) There have been abusive interpretations of this text which conclude from the injunction to teach the right to teach anything and to open schools. There are also the more subtle hermeneutical interpretations of modern exegetes. My reading is more radical. It uncovers an untheological extrapolation and an unconscious extrapolation of the meaning of the text.

The extrapolation is clear. Christians have read into those texts a Roman Empire mentality: *urbi et orbi, pax romana*, one civilization, and all the modern dreams of the same order, often with nice-sounding words, such as "one democracy," "world government," or "world church." The "all nations" of our text could not have meant modern Australia, just as the "darkness over the earth" at the death of Christ did not refer to that same continent, nor did the "idols" of Saint Paul refer to the murri-s of Hindu worship. I wonder if the "little flock" and the "one flock, one shepherd" could ever have meant an organization of one billion people with a monarch on top. Such an interpretation has extrapolated into Jesus the mental of a Roman lawyer or a statesman constituting an assembly (*churcu*) or founding a dynasty. It was the destiny of Christian history to have interpreted this text in this way. It is a legitimate interpretation. But unless we identify the christic event with history, it is not the only possible Christian reading.

The extrapolation is still more interesting. Even assuming Jesus Christ had the intention of establishing a world church as some dream of, the text would not have more authority than when he said that he should not go beyond the borders of Israel or when he commanded that we should live without money. He might have dreamt of a world without money as some dream of a world church. Both are dreams, although with the basic difference that one is a powerful utopia and the other, a dreadful nightmare.

In other words, neither interpretations envisioning Christendom nor those extolling Christianity are today any longer convincing. We need a vision of *christianness*.²⁴

Summing up, the crosscultural value of the Christian event cannot be defended *a priori* as belonging to its very nature. Yet, there is an existential *nissus*, a dynamism, which urges Christians to formulate their truths in universal terms—whether they call such truth revelation or simply Christ. This urge belongs to the very movement of history. But this urge is neither unique nor can it claim special privileges; it is subject to all the constraints of history that we have described. The future of Christian history will show whether this

effort at incarnation follows the pattern of the Grand Inquisitor or the spirit of Bethlehem, under the witness of the skies, the hospitality of animals, the astonishment of shepherds, and the bewilderment of the Magi. Without this mystic core, the entire christic event degenerates into a masochistic complacency in being humble or a sadistic drive to show the power of the Cross.

* * *

From all of these considerations, we can draw a threefold conclusion:

a) Christian theology is translatable only in as much as Christian theologians succeed in making those translations. It is not universally translatable in principle. The drive to translate belongs to the dynamism of history. Translation is not a neutral or easy human activity. If in times past translations were made in order to convert others, the irony of history shows now that good translations demand just the opposite: the conversion of the translator. You cannot immerse yourself in the universe of discourse of the other if you do not sincerely live in the universe of life of the other culture—i.e., if you do no make the foreign culture your own. I do not need to stress that I speak of real translations and not of transliterations.

b) Christian translations work both ways. They are introduced as foreign bodies into other cultures, and then, slowly, they are assimilated and transformed from within those cultures. This transformation is not necessarily only of the guest cultures; it can also provide a stimulation of the host culture to develop its own ways. An Indic theology of the Gospels, for example, may not result in attracting Hindus to Christianity; but it may contribute to strengthening, enhancing, and transforming Hindu beliefs—which is what the adjective "Christian" should mean.

On the other hand, Christian translations also modify the original tradition in an often unforeseeable way. For example, if we were to translate *agape* with *karuna*, *psyche* with *dinman*, *Christos* with *abhisheka*, *logos* with *tao*, *theos* with *allah*, Christian theology would itself undergo a transformation. Each new term or image not only connotes a different universe of discourse; it also opens up the sluices for the living waters of the other culture. Once you introduce the notion of *dharma* into the West, for instance, you can no longer separate ethics from religion, nor can you reduce religion to doctrines. One might reply that Christians do not need Hindus and Buddhists to be aware of such dangers; still, without such eastern

input, Christians would not have the reminder that the fragmentation of knowledge leads to the fragmentation of the knower.

In a word, the translation of a text demands the introduction of an entire context. The mingling of contexts is what brings forth strife and fecundation.

c) The double effect of the translation is not reduced to Christian theology, but has homeomorphic equivalents in other cultures. In this regard, Christian theology has no privileged position. A similar dynamism is detectable in many other cultures. Zen, for instance, is linked and yet not limited to the Buddhist religion.

The fact that the Christian tradition shares the same transcultural limits and promises with other religions in no way diminishes Christian life and self-understanding. Each culture and religion, like each individual being, is unique.

NOTES

1. For both facts and cultural differences, see the collected papers by H. Ch. Puech, *Sur le manichéisme et autres essais* (Paris: Flammarion, 1979), and Samuel N. C. Lieu, *Manichaeism in the Later Roman Empire and Medieval China* (Manchester: University Press, 1985).
2. "In ipsa item catholica ecclesia magnopere curandum est ut id teneamus, quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est. Hoc est etenim vere propriumque catholicum. . . ." S. Vincentius Lirinensis wrote in his famous *Commonitorium* in 434 (P. L. 50, 639).
3. The Pontificate of Pius XII in the Roman Catholic Church might be considered the acme of this mentality. "The Catholic Church does not identify herself with any culture; her essence forbids it." Pius XII, "Discourse to the International Congress of Historical Sciences," September 7, 1955 (AAS, 1955), p. 681. (My translation from the original French.)
4. R. H. Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951), p. 2. It is clear that our perspective here does not attempt a typology such as that implicit in Troeltsch (*Die Soziallehren der christlichen Kirchen und Gruppen*, Tübingen: Mohr, 1912), or the fivefold typology of Niebuhr or the fourfold of Rupp (*Christologies and Cultures*, The Hague: Mouton, 1974). As a matter of fact, my three-partite division could be considered merely formal and thus not an alternative to those mentioned typologies.
5. See my brief paper "Deporre il manto mediterraneo" in *Humanitas* (1962), pp. 876-879, which in the euphoria of the Second Vatican Council was too well received without realizing its far-reaching consequences.
6. See R. Panikkar, "Chosenness and Universality: Can Both Claims Be Simultaneously Maintained?" in *Sharing Worship: Communicatio in Sacris*, P. Puthanangady, ed. (Bangalore: NBCCLC, 1988), pp. 229-250. The entire book is an eloquent example of an Indic theology respectful of but not subservient to tradition.
7. See R. Panikkar, *Die vielen Götter und der eine Herr* (*Beiträge zum ökumenischen Gespräch der Weltreligionen*) (Weilheim: O. W. Barth, 1963).
8. See R. Panikkar, "Indirect Methods in the Missionary Apostolate: Some Theological Reflections," *Indian Journal of Theology*, 19 (1970) 111-113.
9. In his *Christianity in World History* (London: Edinburgh House Press, 1964), Arend Th. Van Leeuwen is a sort of Hegel redivivus trying to link the linear development of history with the unfolding of Christian revelation. His other books, *Prophecy in a Technocratic Era* (New York: Scribner's, 1968) and *Development through Revolution* (New York: Scribner's, 1970), follow the same line. See *The Ecumenical Review*, 24 (1972) 107-109, and Rupp, *op. cit.*, 232ff. for a review of his later and earlier books.
10. "Das abendländische Christentum, welches kämpfte, erstarkte, die Menschheit zum Fortschritt führte, das menschliche Leben auf Erden ausrichtete, ging an dem, was an Christus die Hauptsache ist, völlig vorüber. Es akzeptierte seine Worte, bemerkte aber sein Antlitz nicht. Nur dem Osten war es gegeben, das Antlitz Christi aufzunehmen. Und der Osten sah, dass dieses Antlitz von unendlicher Schönheit und von unendlicher Traurigkeit war." *Das dunkle Antlitz. Metaphysik des Christentums*, in *Russische Religionsphilosophen. Dokumente*, Nicolai von Bubnoff, ed. and trans. (Heidelberg: L. Schneider, 1956), p. 115.

11. "Johann Strauss did not write his waltzes for musicologists but for dancers and lovers," Frederick Franck, "The Cosmic Fish," *Cross Currents*, 36 (1986) 283.
12. The expression is of the Salvadorean Baptist pastor, Marta Benavides, as reported by R. F. Bulman in his article, "Buddha and Christ," in *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 24 (1987) 72. I would even call it theology of life or death, for it is a theology of human survival.
13. "The sad fact about Christianity is that it never really got into the ancient spirit of India," writes a Christian theologian belonging to the ancient Syrian Christian tradition, J. B. Chehinattam, "Giving the Reason of Our Faith," *Ievadharu*, 49 (1979) 72.
14. "Theology to be authentically Asian must be immersed in our historico-cultural situation and grow out of it," declares the final statement of the Asian Theological Conference held at Sri Lanka, January 7-20, 1979, and sponsored by the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians. See *Ievadharu*, 49 (1979) 81. This statement only repeats what has been said time and again over the last fifty years by the majority of theologians of Asia and Africa. See *Theologen der Dritten Welt*, H. Waldenfels, ed. (München: Beck, 1982).
15. The otherwise magnificent articles on "Theologie" in the *Encyclopaedia Universalis* are all inserted within the framework of western culture.
16. Here I can remind scrupulous biblicists of Saint Thomas' exegetical freedom. He says, in fact, that "... omnis veritas quae, salva litterae circumstantia, potest divinae scripturae aptari, est eius sensus." *Quaest. disp. De potentia Dei*, q. 4, a. 1. "... every truth that, with the content of the literal meaning preserved, can be adapted to the holy scripture is its meaning."
17. My own theologumena are efforts in this same direction: the *Supername* to deal with the "no other name;" the *pars pro toto* effect to deal with the Catholic; the homeomorphic equivalents to deal with the different religions; the *Unknown Christ of Hinduism* (which is not the Christ known to Christians); my defense of pluralism up to the very pluralism of truth against sheer plurality and rigid uniformity. The names of some kindred spirits come to mind: Heller, Rahner, Küng, Klostermaier, Cobb, Amaladoss, Chettimattam, Amalorpavadass, Pieris, Schlette, Coward, Knitter, Rupp, D'Costa, W. C. Smith, D'Sa, Krieger.
18. The modern literature on this issue is immense. I offer only a selected bibliography of mainly collected works that indicate contemporary trends: Otto Karer, *Das Religiöse in der Menschheit und das Christentum*, 3rd ed. (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1936) (a pioneer work). Owen C. Thomas, ed., *Attitudes toward Other Religions* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969. Reprint: Lanham: University Press of America, 1986). Donald G. Dawe and John B. Carman, eds., *Christian Faith in a Pluralistic World* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1978). Nihal Abeysingha, *A Theological Evaluation of Non-Christian Rites* (Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 1979). Thomas Emprayil, *The Emerging Theology of Religions* (Vicentian Ashram Rewa: Vicentian Publications, 1980). Paul F. Knitter, *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes toward World Religions* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1985). Harold Coward, *Pluralism* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1985). John Hick and Paul F. Knitter, eds., *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1987). Leonard Swidler, ed., *Toward a Universal Theology of Religion* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1987). M. M. Thomas, *Risking Christ for Christ's Sake* (Geneva: World Council of Churches Publications, 1987).

19. One may be ready to accept the monarchic principle and the ecclesiastical "theocracy" of Dante's *Monarchia* and Soloviev's *La Russie et l'Eglise universelle* and provided one situates those two genial essays within their respective contexts and recognizes that the situation today has radically changed. This mutation is what makes Teilhard de Chardin susceptible of a reductionistic interpretation as if the future of humankind had to follow one single line of development.
20. See the doctoral dissertation by Donald Alexander, *Incarnation: A Model for Crosscultural Communication. A Study in Religious Methodology*. University of California, Santa Barbara, Interdisciplinary Doctoral Committee in Humanities, 1974.
21. Any student of sociology and ethnology will recall the controversies regarding "acculturation," "inculturation," "cultural change," "transculturation" and the like. For a summary introduction we may refer to the corresponding articles in the *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, 1968, and *Encyclopedia Universalis*, 1965. Theological journals today are replete with articles dealing with this problem. See also the following publications: Donald J. Elwood, ed., *What Asian Christians Are Thinking* (Quezon City: New Day, 1976). Gerald H. Anderson and Thomas F. Strassky, eds., *Third World Theologies* (Mission Trends, Nr. 3) 1976 and *Faith Meets Faith* (Mission Trends, Nr. 5) (New York: Paulist Press, 1981). Hans Waldenfels, ed., *Theologen der Dritten Welt* (München: Beck, 1982).
22. "If I want to hand a rose to you, there is a definite movement. But if I want to transmit its scent, I do so without any movement. The rose transmits its own scent without a movement... If we have spiritual truth, it will transmit itself. You talk of the joy of a spiritual experience and say you cannot but share it. Well, if it is a real joy, boundless joy, it will spread itself without the vehicle of speech. In spiritual matters, we have merely to step out of the way. Let God work His way. If we interfere we may do harm. Good is a self-acting force." *Young India*, January 19, 1928.
- This topic was recurrent in Gandhi: "I have a definite feeling that if you want us to feel the aroma of Christianity, you must copy the rose. The rose irresistibly draws people to itself and the scent remains with them." *Young India*, October 15, 1931.
- "A rose does not need to preach. It simply spreads its fragrance. The fragrance is its own sermon." *Harjan*, March 19, 1935.
- "I take the simile of the rose I used years ago. The rose does not need to write a book or deliver a sermon on the scent it sheds all around, or on the beauty which everyone who has eyes can see." *Harjan*, December 12, 1936.
- "... let your life speak to us, even as the rose needs no speech but simply spreads its perfume." *Harjan*, April 17, 1937.
23. See Kai Baago, *A Bibliography* (Library of Indian Christian Theology) (Madras: CLS, 1969), which contains literature since 1600 in European and vernacular languages; R. H. S. Boyd, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology* (Madras: CLS, 1969), which offers a primarily Protestant perspective. The following are mainly from a Roman Catholic perspective: J. Pathrapankal, ed., *Service and Salvation* (Bangalore: T. P. L., 1973). (This is a collection of papers from the Nagpur Theological Conference on Evangelization. The editing committee, not the editor, decided to modify some substantial points of the final conclusions of the Conference in order to take a more "prudent" position in regard to the Roman authorities.) I. Vemperry, *Inspiration in the Non-Biblical Scriptures* (Bangalore: T. P. L., 1983), in which the author argues "that the non-Biblical scriptures are analogically, yet truly, inspired by God." (p. xxi). D. S. Amalorpavadass, ed., *Research Seminar on Non-Biblical Scriptures* (Bangalore: NBCLC, no date). This is a collection of papers from the seminar on this topic in

1974, in which for the first time mainly Catholic theologians dared to pose the long burning questions concerning the relationship of the Bible and other Sacred Scriptures; at that time it seemed daring to call other scriptures "sacred". Michel Amaladoss et al., eds., *Theologizing in India* (Bangalore: T. P. I., 1981)—papers of a seminar held in Poona in 1978. P. Puthanangady, ed., *Towards an Indian Theology of Liberation* (Bangalore: Indian Theological Association, 1981), which collects papers of the annual meeting of the Association in which Latin America liberation theology is affirmed but recognized as inadequate for the Indian situation. Aloysius Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1988)—an impassioned plea for the "religiousness of the poor" across religious frontiers.

24. See R. Panikkar, "The Jordan, the Tiber, and the Ganges," in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, John Hick and Paul F. Knitter, eds. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1987), pp. 89-116.