

# Christophany by Raimon Panikkar

CLIFF NOTES by Cynthia Bourgeault

This profound but complex study weaves together several key ideas in an intricate intellectual tapestry which draws on both theological discourse and lived experience, and on both Christian and Hindu/*advaitic* reference points. Here's the gist, as I see it:

1. When we try to know Jesus from the outside, as an OBJECT of faith, adoration, or doctrine—as is the method of traditional Christology—the result is culturally embedded (dependent on Western thought categories and methodologies) and difficult to connect with the legitimate experience and thought forms (“cosmovisions”) of the rest of the world’s people.
2. But we can also know him from the INSIDE, from what Panikkar calls a “pneumatic” (subject-to-subject, or “I-I”) *interabiding*, rooted in our own deepest experience of spiritual seeking and finding. This involves a lively engagement with “putting on the mind of Christ”—or in other words, experiencing reality as Christ experienced it (entering Christ’s own “cosmivision,”). This entrance into the mind of Christ entails both a praxis (contemplation) and the opening of a new channel of perception within us—what Panikkar calls “the third eye” and I call “heart perception.” IN OTHER WORDS, THE WAY TO CHRIST LEADS THROUGH THE COUAGEOUS AND SUBTLE CONTEMPLATIVE EXPLORATION OF OUR OWN INNERMOST TERRAIN, and the book will call us to do this and show us how.
3. Once we do this, the core discovery is that neither of the two classic options about our identity posed by the world’s great religions holds entirely true: I am not *myself* God (“atman is brahman”) ; but neither am I entirely separate, as a rigid montheism would hold. Instead—and Panikkar’s entire argument hinges on this—I discover myself as “the thou of an I,” (“God is the I, and I am God’s Thou” –p. 35). This is a (actually, *the*) genuine experience of Christian *advaita* or non-dualism (“not one, not two, but both one and two), preserving both the interpenetration of identity and the reality of personhood created and sustained in love.

Once this experience has been personally ground-truthed, Panikkar can then go on to make the following astounding points:

1. Christianity (at least as experienced through the “cosmovision” (or mind) of Christ”) is essentially a NON-DUAL religion. What has distorted this awareness to date has been the attempt to process Jesus’s experience through a rigid Abrahamic monotheism that sees creator and creature separated by an unbridgeable abyss. But Jesus himself neither taught nor experienced this.
2. What Jesus actually experienced and taught is brilliantly contexted within the Trinity, (mystically rather than doctrinally understood.) The Trinity teaches a

pattern of kenosis/perichoresis, whereby through entering into the dance of self-giving love, both unity and difference are preserved. Within the rhythm of the Trinity, Jesus's three core experiences of his own identity ("filiation" or "sonship"; "identity," and "surrender" (*kenosis*) of individual selfhood) are meaningfully interrelated and become as "ikon of all reality."

(NOTE to Aspen Wisdom School students: we have already covered most of this turf in past classes; you can recap the material in Chapter 14 of my *Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening*, and in my cd's with Richard Rohr: *The Shape of God, The Mystery of the Trinity*).

3. The Trinity, then, is Christianity's ikon par excellence of non-dualism.

This in turn leads to two more astonishing discoveries: one personal, the other intercultural:

1. It is possible to personally experience Christ as The "mediator" or "reconciler in one's being between the tension of radical monism ("I am God") and radical dualism ("God is an OTHER"). He becomes the "I" of which you are the "thou."
2. Based on this new location of Christ (as the Christian's deepest experience of the non-dual, and with it, the understanding that this experience is not time-bound, but is continually renewing itself in the heart of the seeker), it becomes possible to fully enter into interspiritual dialogue and action, honoring the "**homeomorphic equivalent**" of Christ in other religious paths, without any need to "dumb down" the intensity or fullness of what this experience means for Christians. (The Third part of Panikkar's book is an effort to explicate these "homeomorphic equivalents").

That's my take on what Panikkar's up to in a nutshell. And on the basis of that overview, here's a very short view of how the argument develops sequentially (so you don't lose the thread of the argument in his scholarship or his digressions; he does weave this basket circularly rather than strictly linearly)

#### Part I INTRODUCTION: The Christophanic Experience

1. **A Challenge to Christology** (pp. 3-5)

He argues that traditional Christology is culturally embedded: Christians talking to other Christians about the meaning of Jesus within the givens of their Western cultural and theological reference points.

2. **The Task of Christophany** (pp. 9-13)

Without specifically defining what Christophany is yet, he lists eight or nine characteristics of it (they overlap and repeat a bit). See my handout contrasting Christology and Christophany.

In the subhead of “*The Literary Genre*” (pp. 13-15) he tries to explain that that this book is not just straight academic theology, but will interweave theology and personal experience.

In the subhead “*The Divine Manifestation*” (pp. 15-17) he introduces his core ideas (which probably will not be sufficiently appreciated at this point) that one of Christianity’s core lived experiences, that of “divinization,” makes sense only within the context of the Trinitarian mystery” (p. 15); “in strict monotheism it becomes impossible or blasphemous.” (16). In other words, he gently begins to introduce the idea that **the real tensions we experience in living or explaining our Christianity come from having mis-identified the cosmovision it actually belongs to.**

### 3. The Christophanic Experience

Panikkar introduces his formal definition of a “**cosmovision**” (pp. 18-19): not just a set of ideas, but an integral vision or filter through which we look at the world) and states the obvious: the Christ’s cosmovision is a good deal different from our own. In Ken Wilber’s terminology, the term “cosmovision” would roughly overlap with “the view” and “altitude.”

In “*The World of Interiority*” (pp. 20-25) he introduces his all-important experience of **theandric**, or inter-abiding presence. He traces the word “*manere*” (“remain,” or “abide” in me) as one of Jesus’s most continuous expressions of the spiritual path, and asks us to experience this *manere* in our own being as the un-collapsible tension between the immanent and the transcendent within us. Both immanent and transcendent “views” create different but authentic and necessary experiences of our belongingness within the divine. Again, Panikkar hints that the Trinity, mystically understood, is the way to preserve and relate both of these.

In “*Mystical Language*” (pp. 25-35) he uses a phrase from St. Teresa of Avila (Christ saying to her: “Seek for yourself in me, seek for me in yourself”) to lead us deeply into this “**christophanic** experience” of self, which is neither pure identity (“autophanic” experience, or “I am God”) nor pure otherness (“theophanic” experience, or “God is other.”) Instead, one gradually discovers that my deepest “I” is the “thou” of another “I” (God); I experience my deepest “I” as the beloved.

This is an important, experiential chapter. Take time with it. This experience will be necessary for you to understand both the process and the significance of what he is up to in Part II

## PART II THE MYSTICISM OF JESUS THE CHRIST

### 1. The Approach (pages 39-87)

This is a long, belabored, and in many ways frustrating chapter’ Panikkar seems to be pushing a rock up a long, hard hill. But what he is really trying to

do is to introduce the core methodology of what he will call his “pneumatic” approach to penetrating into the cosmivision of Christ. This is really a chapter on hermeneutics; it has fascinating overlaps with Ken Wilber’s four quadrants. But” heads up” for Wilberites: they are not exactly the same, and if you simply assume that his “pneumatic” approach is Wilber’s lower left quadrant, you will miss the subtlety of what Panikkar trying to say.

The first of Panikkar’s “Three anthropologies”—“*The individualistic approach*” (pp. 55-60)—corresponds closely to Wilber’s upper right. It is the “I-it,” objective perspective. It assumes that “consciousness is locked up within individual entities” and can be only known from the outside. This has been the predominant view and methodology of traditional Western Christology.

IN THIS VIEW, JESUS IS “HE” OR “IT.”

“*The Personalist approach*” (pp 61-67) is the “I-thou” (or “we”) approach that roughly covers the territory of Wilber’s lower left quadrant. It assumes that consciousness can be opened and shared through love.

IN THIS VIEW, JESUS IS “THOU”— AN OTHER, BUT A BELOVED OTHER.

“*The Pneumatic approach*” (pp. 67-74) attempts to describe a “subject to subject” inter-knowing, which becomes possible when at the deepest level of spirit, one in a sense BECOMES the beloved; is able to enter authentically and fully into their own consciousness so as to be able to re-create it, or bring it forth from within one’s deepest wellsprings of personhood. Beatrice Bruteau (In her book *God’s Ecstasy*) describes this as an “I-I” relationship: One not only loves the beloved, but loves what the beloved loves.

Western Mysticism knows of this state—in Sufism, in the “anagogical” or fourth stage of *lectio divina* (John Cassian said you could tell that monks were accessing this state when “they sing the psalms as if they were composing them”). The beloved becomes completely **correlative** with one’s own deepest interiority: “It is not I who lives, but Christ who lives within me,” says St. Paul—to which Panikkar would undoubtedly amend: “It is not I who lives, but Christ who lives within me *as my deepest ‘I’*.” But to access this awareness requires not only a shift in perception, but in *operating system*. This is the opening of Panikkar’s “third eye,” and as he explains earlier (p. 31): “The third eye does not complete the intellectual I; it belongs to another order.”

IN THIS VIEW, JESUS IS THE “I” OF MY OWN DEEPEST “I.” I CAN KNOW HIM FROM WITHIN BECAUSE HE IS THE IKON OF MY OWN DEEPEST REALITY.

And guess what? : this is the view we are going to adopt in order to penetrate Jesus's most intimate self-knowledge—his own deepest experience of reality—from which his life and teachings spring.

## 2. The Expressions (pages 89-133)

Many people have found this to be the most readable part of Panikkar's book. In this section, he takes three key statements which Jesus makes and uses them as windows into Jesus' experience of his own being and relationality with divine being. He will also lead us, step-by-step, to see that it is only within a Trinitarian context that these statements make sense and assume a coherent and life-giving pattern, the template of all non-dual experience.

1. "*Abba, Father*" expresses his intense sense of "filiation" (i.e., "sonship"). But inclusively, rather than exclusively. Panikkar effectively demolishes Jesus's ONLY, exclusive status (the rest of us are merely "children by adoption") as an example of Roman, legalistic cultural embeddedness and encourages to us to experience our solidarity with him in our common experience of being children. He also lodges another potshot at the incapacity of our Western monotheistic metaphysic to comprehend Jesus' meaning here: "Within a monotheistic context we cannot be God's real children." (p. 98).

2. "*The Father and I are One.*" In this section Panikkar then leads us to discover that this statement of shared identity holds true for us as well...as long as we grasp that the essence here is not "beings" (i.e., two "objects" that are either "alike" or "different") but the unbroken unity of RELATIONALITY itself, which like a battery "needs" the two poles gonly to make manifest the current which arcs between them. The divine is the current, not the poles, and its true nature (love-in-motion) becomes visible in and only in the continuous act of self-communication. Again, a Trinitarian idea.

This section contains Panikkar's beautiful personal meditation (pages 114-116) on the relationship between pure transparency and deepest authenticity. "If I am not mine and discover myself as a you, the you of a Father, then I am the whole of reality seen from the small window I shall call mine; 'I and the Father are one.'"

4. "It is good that I leave:" This section explores Jesus's own willingness to enter the flow—and leave it—through kenosis, or self-surrender. This flow of being is the lifeblood of the Trinity, and the access route by which we enter into it and participate fully. "Being is a verb, an action, an energy," Panikkar writes (p. 129). "Life is a gift, a gift that has been given to us and that we in turn give back; in this fashion we participate in the Father's activity—otherwise we would not be One."

In other word, Panikkar makes the point that when we really enter "pneumatically" into the cosmovision of Christ, we discover the Trinity there: that non-dual flow of

relationality that can hold the poles of “twoness” and “oneness” through the reality of the flow itself. “The experiences of these three sayings (*mahavakya*, as P. calls them) is only one. They do not constitute three separate experiences, inasmuch as one is interwoven with the other.” (133). This interwoven flow—Trinitarian life—IS Jesus’s deepest experience of reality, the cosmivision he is attempting to communicate to us.

His deepest experience is advaitic—nondual. And the Trinity, properly understood, upholds, contexts and fully symbolizes that experience.

### **Part 3: CHRISTOPHANY: The Christic Experience**

“Jesus is the ikon for the whole of reality.” (p. 72). Based on this expanded cosmivision, and the undestanding of Christ as the locus of the Christian nondual, Panikkargoes on to engage in the exercise of “homeomorphic equivalency;” revisioning the core experiential/creedal statements that Christians make about Jesus in terms and categories that can be entered into from intercultural and InterSpritual reference points. His nine “sutra” cut in two directions simultaneously: helping non-Christians to understand within the terms of their own cosmivisions the singular importance accorded to Christ within the Christian cosmivision, while also helping Christians to deepen, rephrase—and in some cases, withdraw—their exaggerated claims based on a rigid, intellectual monotheism. The goal: “to move from a tribal Christology into a Christophany less bound to a single cultural current.” (P. 162). These nine sutra need to be carefully studied, shared, and “ruminated together” in an InterSpritual context. They offer themselves as a powerful “Memorandum of Agreement” for all engaged in interspiritual work, and a strong platform upon which to move into Teal/Turquoise levels of cognitive understanding (to use the Wilber model).

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