public affairs. Khatami invokes the authority of the “real Islam” which he sees as the route to achieve the spiritual and technological advancement. He argues that Islamic theology must evolve to meet the demands of the revolution and also the practical needs of the Iranian people.

He further suggests that Muslims must concede that the incompatibility of modern civilization with tradition bound Islamic civilization is one of the most important causes of the crisis in Iranian society. The answer he argues lies neither in remaining immersed in our tradition bound culture, nor in melting into Western civilization but forging a new way. This new way he labels the “other way”. The “other way” will not only preserve historical Islamic identity of Iranian society but also prevent destruction and the unravelling of its social fabric.

In chapters six to eleven President Khatami offers an insightful outline of this ‘other way’ and in the process of doing so provides important insights into his government’s reform agenda. These chapters also provide a framework for resurrecting Islam’s “social project” for the future. The essential feature of the social project is to establish a viable social order on earth which is just and ethically based. For Khatami this type of social order can not be achieved by the Western civilization because of its internal contradictions. While acknowledging its great scientific and technological achievements he argues that its power is based on an unethical exploitation of fellow human beings and Nature and this is gradually eroding its appeal and legitimacy.

The alternative is an ethically based system which is centred around veneration and reverence of human beings as the ultimate measure of development. Some of these arguments are reminiscent of the neo-Marxist critiques of Western capitalist development of 1960s and 1970s. Khatami also never questions the validity or viability of one of his central arguments that the political, economic and technological survival and salavation of Iran and the Muslim world lies in accepting the precepts of “real Islam” which has been ushered in by Iran's Islamic Revolution. In particular he offers no explanation of the growing disenchantment of a majority of Iranians with the Islamic Revolution. Notwithstanding these criticisms, this book is an important contribution for it provides important insights into the political and social thought of one of the most important and influential contemporary Muslim intellectual-politicians, and the Centre for Arab and Islamic Studies of the Australian National University must be commended for publishing it.

Riaz Hassan

Raimon Panikkar. The Intrareligious Dialogue. Revised Edition

Raimon Panikkar was born into two major religious traditions, Catholicism and Hinduism. Since his earliest years, he has been concerned with the interplay of these traditions and disciplines. He is a renowned philosopher and theologian, with
doctorates in chemistry, philosophy and theology. For many years he was a professor of Religious Studies at the University of California in Santa Barbara, but now resides in Spain. Pannikar is considered to be one of the foremost thinkers on inter-religious dialogue and comparative religion. Raimon Panikkar is keenly interested in interreligious dialogue. However, as the title of his book, *The Intrareligious Dialogue*, indicates, he places as much emphasis on the “multireligious experience” (pp. 50–51) that takes place within the individual religious person, as he does on the multireligious experience that results when two persons adhering to different religious communions come together for the purpose of religious dialogue. For Panikkar, in order for an *interreligious* dialogue between two persons to be really meaningful, it must be preceded by their individual *intrareligious* dialogues, in which each of the prospective dialogue partners attempts wholeheartedly to understand, embrace, and appropriate the religious beliefs of the other. Panikkar understands such dialogues to be grounded in the personal religious experience of the participants.

A point regarding *The Intrareligious Dialogue’s* history of publication in English is in order. (Its several foreign language translations will not concern us here.) The first edition was published in 1978, followed by a second in 1983. The main difference between the third, 1999 edition and the previous two is that the third edition contains four new chapters, as well as significant additions to chapter one. As nine of its ten chapters had been previously published, either as articles in journals or as chapters in edited collections, *The Intrareligious Dialogue* is essentially a gathering together of Panikkar’s previous publications on the topic of interreligious encounter.

The heart of Panikkar’s constructive proposal is found in chapter three, “Faith and Belief: A Multireligious Experience”. There he contends that the crucial prerequisite for genuine dialogue is the acknowledgment by the participants “that a single faith may express itself in contrasting and even contradictory beliefs…” (p. 47). This distinction between faith and belief has been discussed by a number of scholars of religion, the most prominent among them being the late Professor Wilfred Cantwell Smith. Panikkar understands the faith/belief distinction in the following terms. Faith is something that all human beings have in common. Further, faith is something which “no set of words, no expression, can ever exhaust”; but despite this fact, human beings nevertheless feel compelled to try to express their faith, and their attempts at making “such expressions [are] called beliefs” (p. 55). While faith is thus universal, beliefs are particular. While faith is conviction as such, belief is conviction about something in particular. Panikkar adds that since “faith finds expression in belief”, the two, although distinct, are intimately bound together (p. 55). He summarizes the relation between faith and belief in these terms: “Faith cannot be equated with belief, but faith always needs a belief to be faith. Belief is not faith, but it must convey faith” (p. 55).

It is this understanding of the distinction between faith and belief that underlies Panikkar’s insistence that the first step of genuine religious dialogue is the acknowledgment “that a single faith may express itself in contrasting and even contradictory beliefs”. “The next step”, following that acknowledgment, is, according to Panikkar, “to understand the other’s position” (p. 47). But “a tremendous difficulty arises” in regard to such an attempt at understanding. Panikkar articulates that difficulty as follows: “I can never understand [the other’s] position as she does — and this is the only real understanding between people — unless I share her view; in a word, unless I judge it to be somewhat true. It is contradictory to imagine I understand another’s view
when at the same time I call it false” (p. 47, emphasis added). In short, there is a sense
in which “to understand is to be converted to the truth one understands” (p. 48).
Panikkar justifies this claim on theological grounds by having recourse to the biblical
command that we love our neighbour as ourselves (p. 49). The conclusion to which this
line of thought leads Panikkar becomes the starting point for his model of
“multireligious experience”: “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” (p. 49).
But how does one go about coming to know the religious other as oneself? Panikkar
responds to this question by elaborating his “intrareligious dialogue” model of
multireligious experience.

The multireligious experience Panikkar envisions is comprised of three central
elements. First, as has just been seen, he insists that the attempt must be made to
understand the religious other “from the inside” (p. 50), that is, as far as possible, to
understand religious others as they understand themselves. He refers to this attempt at
gaining an insider’s understanding as an “existential incarnation” (p. 50), because the
person undertaking the experience enters so deeply and so completely into the world
of the religious other as to actually become, for the time being at least, an adherent of the
other’s religion. Such an existential incarnation will include acts of “prayer, initiation,
study and worship” (p. 50). This, and nothing less, is what Panikkar means by an
“existential incarnation” into another religious world.

The second central element of Panikkar’s model is his insistence that the
existential incarnation is an experience, not an experiment; it “is not experimentation but a
genuine experience undergone within one’s own faith” (p. 50). The multireligious
experience is thus something one does, something one lives, something one undergoes,
within the context of one’s own faith. It is important to recall that for Panikkar faith is
just faith. There is no such thing as “Christian faith” or “Muslim faith”; faith is
everywhere one and the same. It is only the conceptual expressions of faith — that is,
beliefs — that vary. Muslim beliefs do really differ from Christian beliefs. The point of
the multireligious experience is thus to try to understand the other’s beliefs as that other
understands them. And to do a proper job of that, the participants in such an encounter
must experientially embrace the beliefs of the other, assume them to themselves, and
assume them to be true.

The third central element in Panikkar’s model is his insistence that one’s existential
incarnation into the religious world of the other — one’s attempt to understand
religious reality as the other understands it must be so total and so complete as to
actually risk conversion. “Abstract principles do not enable one to foresee what will
happen in such an encounter; she must be prepared to stake everything she is and
believes... because the venture hazards — or to be more precise, let us say makes
possible — a conversion so thoroughgoing that the convictions and beliefs she had
hitherto held may vanish or undergo a far-reaching change” (p. 51). The multireligious
experience therefore begins with no guarantee that, when it is over, the participants’
beliefs will be exactly what they were before the experience was undertaken, but
according to Panikkar, that is a risk one must be willing to take. Once again, it is
important to remember that, for Panikkar, whatever may happen in the realm of one’s
beliefs, one’s faith remains what it ever had been before the multireligious experience
was undertaken, only now no doubt much enriched.
All this sounds very risky. Panikkar is the first to admit that “not everyone is called to such an undertaking, nor is everyone capable of it” (p. 50). Further, the multireligious experience requires “a particular cast of mind, it presupposes perhaps a special constellation in one’s character and background that enables one to undergo the experience without any taint of exoticism, exhibitionism or simply unremitting intellectualism” (p. 50). Indeed, the participants need to enter this venture “with no misgivings about slipping into heresy or apostasy” (p. 51). It is undoubtedly the case that only a small minority of religious people would be both willing and able to participate in such an experience, and to run the risk that it involves. But for those who are — for those whose faith prompts them to undertake the multireligious experience — the rewards of a deeper understanding of the religious other, rediscovered or newfound beliefs, and an enriched faith may, according to Panikkar, be theirs for the winning.

Panikkar’s notion of multireligious experience gives rise to a significant difficulty. The confidence he places in the ability or suitability of committed religious people “becoming” adherents of another religion, even if only for a time, is questionable. It is one thing for a Muslim, or a devotee of any other religious tradition for that matter, to participate as an observer in another tradition’s worship, to study that tradition’s texts, and to learn from the teachers who have mastered those texts. But is it not somewhat reckless to assert that a Muslim, ‘for example’, can or should, with no misgivings about falling into apostasy, existentially embrace another religious tradition? Granted, Panikkar admits that only a small minority of religious people would be capable of undertaking his project. But even so, it would seem that to have “misgivings” about such a radical endeavour would be, at the very least, prudent.

Despite that difficulty, Panikkar’s model of multireligious experience has much to commend it. First and foremost, it allows committed religious people to give the religious other the benefit of the doubt when it comes to the thorny issue of seemingly contradictory religious truth claims, since the model acknowledges that different, even contradictory, beliefs can be contained within one and the same faith. Panikkar’s model thus helps us come to terms with the real possibility that ultimate truth might be more transcendent than anyone ever realized, and therefore far too vast to be completely encompassed within the boundaries of any one religious tradition. Our recognition of this possibility should engender an attitude of appreciation, openness, and humility toward the adherents of other religions, as well as toward their beliefs. Therefore, although certain aspects of Panikkar’s notion of multireligious experience may be too radical to be really practicable, his model is still deserving of the consideration of contemporary religious people who place a high value on interreligious encounter and interreligious appreciation.

Unfortunately, specific references to the Islamic tradition, as well as to Muslim participation in interreligious dialogue, are infrequent in The Intrareligious Dialogue, and the handful of references that do occur are not substantial. This is somewhat surprising, since Panikkar, who is a Roman Catholic Christian, is writing from within the Indian context, in which Islam plays such a prominent role. The specific examples of interreligious encounter that he develops are Christian-Hindu and Christian-Buddhist. This shortcoming notwithstanding, the book may still be of great interest to Muslim readers, since its central model of “multireligious experience” may, if so desired, be adapted by Muslim participants in dialogue, as well as by the adherents of other faiths.
Two other recent books on interreligious dialogue that do specifically incorporate a Muslim perspective are *John Paul II and Interreligious Dialogue*, edited by Byron L. Sherwin and Harold Kasimow (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), and *Christian-Muslim Dialogue in the Twentieth Century*, by Ataullah Siddiqui (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997). The former includes essays by two prominent Muslim scholars working in the United States, Ibrahim Abu Rabi and Mahmoud Ayoub, while the latter incorporates the viewpoints of Isma'il Raji al-Faruqi, Ayoub, Hasan Askari, Khurshid Ahmad, Mohammed Talbi, and Seyyed Hossein Nasr.

*Joseph Molleur*


Anyone familiar with medieval Arabic chronicles and literary sources for the early ‘Abbasid period is well aware that they are full of fascinating anecdotal and narrative material about the lives of the caliphs which historians have used to construct biographies, especially for seemingly larger-than-life figures such as Harun al-Rashid and his son al-Ma'mun. But what does this material really tell us about these men? Certainly it can be and has been used to construct a basic narrative framework for a particular caliph’s reign, though divergent accounts present some problems even on this basic level. However, the elusive and allusive nature of so much of this material leaves one wondering whether what is recorded is a genuine reflection of actual events and occurrences or whether it can be better understood as reflections of the sympathies, prejudices, aspirations and subsequent eras of the chroniclers themselves. If one opts for the latter more skeptical approach, as does El-Hibri, he is then left with the difficult proposition of how to separate the intertwining lines of fiction and fact in these sources. El-Hibri pursues this goal by seeking to answer three fundamental questions. “What did the narratives about the caliphs signify in their times? How did anecdotes convey various levels of thematic meaning? To what extent were literary tropes appreciated and detected by the medieval audience?” (p. 2). None of these is an easy question to answer, and El-Hibri is to be commended for tackling such difficult questions head on.

El-Hibri’s answers to these questions may strike some as too skeptical, too speculative or too theoretical. His central thesis is that “the historical accounts of the early ‘Abbasid caliphs were originally intended to be read not for facts, but for their allusive power. Their descriptions of the lives of caliphs may seem realistic, but the narrators intended their anecdotes to form a frame for social, political, and religious commentary” (p. 216). In addition, his recurrent disclaimer that the historicity of one or another narrative account can never be ascertained will likely leave the more epistemologically optimistic feeling rather discouraged. Nevertheless, *Reinterpreting Islamic Historiography* is a refreshing, thoughtful, meticulously researched, wide-ranging, meaty, insightful and even entertaining literary-critical reassessment of medieval Islamic historiography on the early ‘Abbasid caliphate.