

THE COSMIC ELEMENTS IN RELIGION, PHILOSOPHY, ART AND LITERATURE

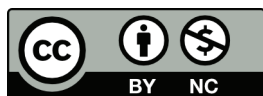
Kala Acharya, Ignacio Arellano, Mariano Iturbe,
Prachi Pathak, Rudraksha Sakrikar (eds.)



Kala Acharya, Ignacio Arellano, Mariano Iturbe, Prachi Pathak, Rudraksha Sakrikar (eds.), *The Cosmic Elements in Religion, Philosophy, Art and Literature*, Pamplona, Servicio de Publicaciones de la Universidad de Navarra, 2015. Colección BIADIG (Biblioteca Áurea Digital), 34 / Publicaciones Digitales del GRISO.

EDITA:

Servicio de Publicaciones de la Universidad de Navarra.



Esta colección se rige por una [Licencia Creative Commons Atribución-
NoComercial 3.0 Unported](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/).

ISBN: 978-84-8081-481-2.

CONCEPT OF BASIC ELEMENTS IN RELIGION,
PHILOSOPHY AND LITERATURE?
RAIMON PANIKKAR'S DISCUSSION OF
CONCEPT AND SYMBOL

Francis X. D'Sa

Every authentic word is a sacrament.
It is a vow, a commitment; it implies a fidelity...¹

INTRODUCTION

The theme of our seminar is «The Concept of Basic Elements in Religion, Philosophy and Literature». To indicate my approach to this theme I have added a question mark to the title of my paper. There are three reasons for this: (a) The concept of the basic elements, however basic the elements may be, deals with abstractions. (b) Whatever importance these basic elements might have, derives from the fact that they are integral elements of a larger whole, however it may be called. Finally (c) in order to avoid overstressing concepts, on the one hand, and, on the other, to recall that the larger whole has an important part to play (albeit in the background) one will have to revive a reality called symbol which is the exact opposite of concept².

Arguably the concept of basic elements is important for many — Google's listing of books with the word «concept» in their titles shows more than 121,000 entries. The following reflections are not a polemic against concepts. They highlight the way «concept» and

¹ Panikkar, 1980, p. 126.

² For example, symbols are polyvalent whereas concepts are precise. Concepts are intelligible within their specific cosmovisions, but symbols have the wherewithal to become cross-culturally evocative.

«symbol» have to be envisioned so that the structure of human understanding becomes a tad bit clearer. The following reflections take their cue from Raimon Panikkar's contribution wherein he has thematized the vast difference between words and terms. They suggest that the basic elements are primarily of the nature of symbol and as such are polyvalent, open to multiple experiences and meanings. Symbols are the stepping-stones to cross-cultural and interreligious understanding³.

UNDERSTANDING CONCEPTS

Panikkar has repeatedly stressed that (a) «a concept is meaningful, and hence valid, only where it was conceived»⁴. This statement is pregnant with consequences⁵. And (b) For Panikkar «Concepts qua concepts need to be immutable —otherwise conceptual knowledge would be impossible»⁶. A good example for this in our times dominated by the scientific world-view would be H₂O as the concept of water.

In his seminal article «Words and Terms» Panikkar elaborates on the major difference between them⁷. The world of science in some of its enterprises makes use of words⁸ and in the process reduces them to terms⁹. Thus from its perspective water *is* H₂O. This is consistent with its «empirical» approach. The real here is reduced to the empirical. Science as such does not, indeed cannot say anything more than that. Its method limits its scope. The quantum physicist Werner Heisenberg, famous for his uncertainty principle, expressed surprise when attending a philosophical conference that philosophers were vying with each other to emulate the empirical method¹⁰.

³ See D'Sa, 1997.

⁴ Panikkar, 1983.

⁵ One has to recall that concept (*conceptus*) is the past participle of the latin verb to conceive (*concipere*).

⁶ Panikkar, 1996, pp. 251-252.

⁷ Panikkar, 1980, pp. 117-133.

⁸ Panikkar, 1980, 124: «A real word includes the speaker as much as the spoken with, the spoken of and the spoken to. A word is not an isolated entity». This is in line with Panikkar's hermeneutics. See Panikar, 1978, pp. 51-64.

⁹ Panikkar, 1980, p. 121.

¹⁰ Heisenberg, 1969.

For Panikkar our experience [of being-in-the-world] is of a threefold nature: «I», «You» and «It». Science, as science, can only deal with the It – treating everyone and everything as objects¹¹. Science can study the I and the You but it does this by reducing them to an It. This way I and You are made amenable to the scientific method!¹²

Now, measurability is the first and most universal character of the 'is' *i.e.* its propensity for being reduced to quantitative parameters. This is what is called experimentation *i.e.* the application of mathematics to other fields of the real. This is the most distinctive feature of the Modern scientific period of the Western world¹³.

That means science¹⁴ cannot deal with the 'I' and the 'You' as persons. «Even when the Sciences deal with you or me, they deal with 'us' in an objective dispassionate, 'scientific' way, having previously reduced 'me' and 'you' to objects of corresponding observations or measurements»¹⁵.

Panikkar concludes: «Ultimately Science does not need words. It requires only signs¹⁶. With mathematical or algebraic signs this is patent. It is less obvious when Science uses common names as signs. They should properly be called terms. *Science uses terms and not, strictly speaking, words*»¹⁷. For Panikkar «a term can be used any number of times when we want to designate the object meant by that term. It is mere repetition¹⁸. No word, on the other hand, can be properly repeated»¹⁹. Panikkar clarifies this with examples:

¹¹ Panikkar, 1980, p. 119: «Science is the domain of the 'is'. The 'is' is the object. An object 'is' this or that. Any statement in the 'third person' contains objective affirmations of a certain state of affairs».

¹² Panikkar, 1980, p. 119.

¹³ Panikkar, 1980, p. 118.

¹⁴ But even the 'It' is not an island in the world of the real.

¹⁵ Panikkar, 1980, p. 119.

¹⁶ Panikkar says, «we use terms (which are signs) to designate references, and we speak words (which are symbols) to live in communion with our fellow beings», 1980, p. 133.

¹⁷ Panikkar, 1980, p. 119. My emphasis.

¹⁸ Interestingly Kumāriḷa Bhaṭṭa, the Mīmāṃsā Philosopher, in his Ślokaṵārttika, says that for a cognition to be valid it has to be (a) stable/firm (dṛḁham), (b) new/fresh (utpannam jñānam) and (c) not contradicted by another cognition (na

'Moon' is a name which stands as the sign for a Newtonian or at most Einsteinian material body (satellite) which rotates with a uniform and known speed around the planet Earth at a definite distance; 'Philippines' is the name for six thousand islands geographically exactly situated and historically determined, with a definite population, a more or less complicated economy and perhaps a peculiar psychology among its inhabitants: both of these are signs referring to scientific facts, either already known or sufficiently delineated as reasonable scientific hypotheses.

'Time' is no longer what people throughout human history have understood by that name, but simply the mathematical relation between distance (called again equivocally 'space') and speed. 'Force' has little to do with power, but is simply the product of 'mass' by 'acceleration'. 'Energy', 'light', 'matter', 'air', etc. are no longer more or less mysterious beings with possible life of their own and freedom, but scientific parameters whose 'nature' (*i.e.* birth and origin) is not important, but whose behaviour we can 'know', *i.e.* predict²⁰.

Panikkar perceives in the shift from words to terms both a positive as well as a negative aspect. The former refers to «a gain» which enables a precise outlook in the world of objectivity. But the negative aspect is catastrophic

when Man falls into the psycho-sociological temptation of considering the objective world the only important and ultimately real world and/or the philosophical temptation of assuming that objectivity is the only precise and knowable reality: scientific outlook overshadows then human insight²¹.

The deleterious consequence of this is the great pretension that the language of science is universal. Panikkar interprets it as «universal translatability». By this he means that the terms «remain purely formal without meaning anything beyond and behind [the terms] 2

visamvādam icchati jñānāntareṇa). A cognition that is not a new/fresh act of cognition (cognition refers here to «understanding», *i.e.* Heidegger's *Verstehen*), does not qualify for *pramāṇatvam*. See D'Sa, *Śabdaprāmāṇyam in Śābara and Kumārila. Towards a Study of the Mīmāṃsā Experience Language*, 180ff.

¹⁹ Panikkar, 1980, p. 131.

²⁰ Panikkar, 1980, p. 120.

²¹ Panikkar, 1980, p. 121.

+ 2 = 4»²². But one cannot follow the same procedure for «hearts or minds, still less for persons» because «they are not universalizable»²³.

Such a procedure reduces «language to a means, Man to an information system and Reality to a global net of communication» and thus impoverishes all three²⁴. Because: «*We use terms, but we speak words. A word is not a mere term. The word is not a simple sign*»²⁵. Panikkar argues: «Terms are not flexible; they are exact, precise. You cannot call a substance sulfurous if it is sulfuric»²⁶.

Panikkar traces the fall of a culture to «the confusion between terms and words». Such a culture is no longer alive. Its culture is fossilized. «The means have become the ends and the ends have been forgotten»²⁷.

PANIKKAR'S UNDERSTANDING OF LANGUAGE

It is different with words; by nature they are polyvalent. They are connected with the world surrounding the context from which they arise. That is why, «The word is the symbol *par excellence*»²⁸. Panikkar recalls Wilhelm von Humboldt's insight: «in order to understand a single word, already we need the totality of language»²⁹. He supports von Humboldt's thesis because «there is no word without connection with an entire language and a group of people»³⁰. And: «A real word includes the speaker as much as the spoken with, the spoken of and the spoken to. A word is not an isolated entity». That is to say, before, behind, above, within and after is the mystery of language. We find it difficult to accept the underlying assumption: the ontological priority of language! Language is more than «a set of signs merely indicating external relations among independent entities»³¹.

Panikkar's discussion of the word reveals his understanding of language. A word does not stand for something else, it does not

²² Panikkar, 1980. pp. 121-122.

²³ Panikkar, 1980. p. 122.

²⁴ Panikkar, 1980. pp. 122-123.

²⁵ Panikkar, 1980, p. 123. My highlighting.

²⁶ Panikkar, 1980. p. 123.

²⁷ Panikkar, 1980. p. 130.

²⁸ Panikkar, 1980. p. 130.

²⁹ Panikkar, 1980. p. 123.

³⁰ Panikkar, 1980. p. 128.

³¹ Panikkar, 1980. p. 124.

point to something totally independent of and separable from the word. Thus he correctly goes on to state that without the word 'justice' we would not have justice!

The word is the revelation of what it says; and the word is the saying, it is the appearance, the epiphany of what it says from the speaker to the spoken to. A word is a word when it says (something to us), *i.e.* when we understand it. And we understand a word when we stand under its spell and the word manifests (puts in our hand), puts at our disposal what it says... A word is a word when it speaks³².

Panikkar continues:

The word is like an arch which would not only unite, but also make, by distinguishing them, the two shores of it bridges. The shores are different shores, and neither an undistinguishable monistic ocean nor two unrelated dualistic infinitely distant rivers, precisely because the arch is there. The pillars of the arch are grounded in the shores, and in our metaphor they are the shores which belong to the arch as much as the arch proper is part of the total arch³³.

Also:

Time and space belong to the word *qua* word-word, like Man, is also a temporal being. Each word is unique... It is a calling or an answering (*i.e.* a swearing, an oath) for the sake of saying something which is inseparable from the saying itself and which cannot be reduced to the mere 'contents' of the saying. The content depends on the container, and vice-versa. Both belong together. Every authentic word is a sacrament. It is a vow, a commitment; it implies fidelity... A word reveals me to you and cannot be reduced to just the objective or objectifiable statement. *Each word is anew each time it is said...When I give my word I give*

³² Panikkar, 1980. p. 125. Panikkar's «word is a word when it speaks» has close resemblance to Śabarāswami's comment on “[codanā] bravīti” (see Frauwallner's translation of Śabarabhāṣyam, 1968, p. 17: “Er sagt” heißt ‘er läßt erkennen, er ist Anlaß für den Erkennenden’; and to Heidegger's” [“die Sprache spricht”] “it is language that speaks (quoted in D'Sa, Śabdaprāmāṇyam in Śabara and Kumāṛila, p. 30).

³³ Panikkar, 1980. p. 125.

myself, my fidelity, my life: it is me. Fidelity to terms is meaningless. Fidelity to words is constitutive of the word itself³⁴.

Such an understanding of language makes it clear:

why the word, living words, a language as a mode of being human, cannot be merely translated as a simple repetition at another pitch. If at all, it has to be re-enacted in a new setting. It has to be a liturgical and creative act. You cannot translate the Vedas. You have to sing and pray them anew, and yet you may use another idiom, another rhythm. You may change the flute and the drum, the mode and the rhythm and yet you 'know' (*veda*) that you are doing the same 'in memory of me' (*anamnesis*). You cannot substitute words. You have to 'speak' the music anew with different instruments. The proper function of the word is to name —as Vedas and Bible attest. The original case of the words is the vocative, not the nominative, much less the oblique. *Each word is fruit of a calling in a double sense: you call and you are called.* Every word is an invocation, and not an answer...You speak words as you call persons: words have a sense; you name things as you mean things: things have a meaning; you term objects as you intend concepts: terms have a reference.

I have summed up this complex problematic affirming that the real word is a symbol and not a sign. The symbol is not objectifiable...³⁵

SYMBOL, SYMBOLIZED AND SYMBOLIZER³⁶

Panikkar has a refreshing approach to symbol. This greek word is a combination of *sym-* and *ballein*, throwing together, putting together the symbol and the symbolized reality.

The symbol symbolizes, and you do not confuse the symbol with the symbolized, but neither do you separate them. The symbol is the symbolizing. You could not know and love me if I were without the body. Yet, though in a way I am my body, I am not just the body you see or

³⁴ Panikkar, 1980, pp. 125-126. My highlighting.

³⁵ Panikkar, 1980, p. 126. My highlighting.

³⁶ See the insightful work of Clemens Mendonca, 2001, especially chapters two and three. Mendonca's book is a detailed application of Panikkar's approach to the field of intercultural dialogue in general and the indian context in particular.

know (nor am I my body plus something else). My body is my symbol. Their relation is constitutive. This relation is the symbol³⁷.

In order to follow Panikkar we have first to give up the popular understanding of symbol, where the flag is taken to be the symbol of the country and represents (not makes present) the country and the lily is the symbol of purity because it represents purity. In Panikkar's approach this is different.

A smile is the symbol of joy and joy is the symbolized reality because the joy is visible only in and through the smile. The smile does not represent the joy in the heart but it really *makes present* the joy. In Panikkar's world to symbolize is 'to make present'. The major difference between a sign and a symbol is this: Whereas a sign represents, a symbol *makes present*. In Panikkar's vocabulary symbolizing is an ontological process because of which the *symbolic difference* between symbol and symbolized reality becomes important³⁸.

Symbol here does not *mean* an epistemic sign. It *is* an *ontomythical* reality that *is* precisely in the symbolizing. A symbol is not a symbol of another ('thing'), but of itself, in the sense of the subjective genitive. A symbol is the symbol of that which *is* precisely (symbolized) in the symbol, and which, thus, does not exist without its symbol. A symbol is the symbol of that which appears in and as the symbol. A symbol is nothing but the symbol of that which appears in and as the symbol. Yet we must beware of identifying the symbol with the symbolized. To overlook the *symbolic difference*, i.e., to mistake the symbol for the symbolized, is precisely *avidyā*, ignorance, confusing the appearance with the reality. But reality is reality precisely because it 'appears' real³⁹.

³⁷ Panikkar, 1980, p. 127.

³⁸ Compare this with Panikkar, 1983, p. 7: «The symbol is neither a merely objective entity in the world (the thing 'over there'), nor is it a purely subjective entity in the mind (in us 'over here'). There is no symbol that is not in and for a subject, and there is equally no symbol without a specific content claiming objectivity. The symbol encompasses and constitutively links the two poles of the real: the object and the subject».

³⁹ Panikkar, 1983, pp. 6-7. The word 'appears' here might create a misunderstanding. Here it means like in a statement «she appeared unexpectedly».

THE SYMBOL OF ONTONOMY

Reality as a universe of symbols implies that there is no isolated symbol and that all of reality is an interconnected world of symbols. In such a world there are no objects but everything has an object dimension just as there is a subject dimension to every being too. In his book, *The Vedic Experience: Mantramañjarī*⁴⁰ Panikkar speaks of the Vedic symbol of *Rta* which

stands for that nonontological but nevertheless real principle of order and of activity. *Rta* is the very energy of the sacrifice; it is what triggers the sacrifice. We may remember that ardor, truth, and *rta* share an intimate relationship. Truth without *rta* would not be true. All the powers of ardor, concentration, energy, and the like are connected with *rta*. Indeed, the whole order of the universe comes from and is maintained by the dynamism of *rta*...

Rta is the ultimate foundation of everything; it is the supreme, although this is not to be understood in a static sense. *Rta* points to an original and universal factor prior to the cosmic and human scission between the father and mother principles... *Rta* is rather the law or universal order embodied in sacrifice. It is the expression of the primordial dynamism that is inherent in everything and also possesses its own internal coherence, a unifying force that could be said to be the very soul of sacrifice.

Behind the dynamism of cosmic interrelatedness and harmony is *rta*. It is this symbol, I suspect, that gave rise to Panikkar's principle of *ontonomy*, the law of being, that governs the unique relationship of a being to all beings⁴¹. The unique ontonomic interrelationship that obtains between the three dimensions of reality (God, World and Man or as the Divine, the Cosmic and the Human) is the basis of all interrelations⁴². The reality of symbol, of the world of symbols and of the world as the foundational symbol is of a piece with the ontological structure of reality as well as of human understanding.

Man is a participant in the tripolar relationship between the three centres of reality: the Divine, the Cosmic and the Human. Translat-

⁴⁰ The full title is: *The Vedic Experience: Mantramañjarī. An Anthology of the Vedas for Modern Man and Contemporary Celebration*, 1977, pp. 350-351.

⁴¹ Panikkar, 1973. See the whole chapter on Secularization, pp. 28-55. For *ontonomy* see 41ff.

⁴² Panikkar, 1993.

ed into the context of our discussion this means: Symbol, Symbolized and Symbolizer. The Cosmic is the symbol, the Divine is the Symbolized and the Human is the Symbolizer who discovers (not creates) symbols. One does not automatically become a symbolizer. One could perhaps put it this way: One is endowed with the symbolizer-ability but one needs to activate this ability so that one's awareness-antenna is attuned to the wave-length of the world of symbols. In today's world that tends to objectify every being this might appear to be a hopeless task. But deepening one's awareness is the path one has to tread towards this goal.

LOGOS AND MYTHOS

Panikkar speaks of *logos* and *mythos*. Logos is the realm of intelligibility, articulation and formulation, and mythos is the realm of the ineffable background. Whenever something is understood it enters into the mythic realm. With the enlarged mythic background one understands differently. When such understanding enters the mythic background the new understanding operates differently and again a new understanding emerges. So it goes on and on. For Panikkar there is a conscious passage from *mythos* to *logos* and from *logos* to *mythos*⁴³. The understanding that operates at the mythic level is enriched whenever something is understood; the understood then enters the magma of the mythos. With that the newly enlarged preunderstanding now operates differently. Understanding and preunderstanding are very closely linked. The preunderstanding determines how understanding should work. When this takes place, understanding alters the preunderstanding because what is understood becomes part of the preunderstanding. This is what Panikkar calls the «conscious passage from *mythos* to *logos*».

The distinction between *mythos* and *logos* is an essential component of Panikkar's hermeneutics. His complaint is that today's thinking influenced by the scientific spirit is inclined to overlook the existence and working of the mythos. This has led to the objectification of reality —what Panikkar has called the reduction of reality to «It». What unites people in the first place is a myth, be it the myth of peace or the myth of an ecologically sustainable world or the myth of the objectivity of science or even the myth of the con-

⁴³ Panikkar, 1983, p. 6.

cept. But myths emerge following the dynamics of human interaction. They cannot be directly manipulated.

The world of concepts, with its neglect of the mythic dimension, understandably (over-)stresses concepts. The result is logocentrism, the stress on the *logos* at the expense of the *mythos*. From this, the reduction of the «I» and the «You» to an «It» is not far away, so too the reduction of the symbol to an object. The object inevitably leads us to the concept⁴⁴.

Following Wilhelm von Humboldt we can state that a word is connected to an entire language. This is because: «*The word is symbol*»⁴⁵. That means, firstly, that word participates both in the *logos* and in the *mythos*. Secondly, it makes present the interrelationships of reality. And thirdly, it reveals both meaning and significance.

CONCLUSION

On this background I am suggesting that the expression «basic concepts» does not do justice to the way things function. We need to replace it with the expression «basic symbols» or «basic symbolic aspects» of reality where the mythic dimension of our consciousness is operative. Ultimately reality remains ineffable. The more we understand it the more remains to be understood. The *logos* dimension of language is not the whole of reality. There is also the *mythos* dimension. Such is the nature of symbol. No symbol can be known exhaustively. Symbols are bridge builders between the *logos* and the *mythos*. Different cultures experience symbols differently and express their experience of symbols in different ways. There is in symbol a depth-dimension that cannot be objectified. This is not an impoverishment. The inexhaustibility of a symbol is a great enrichment. The real impoverishment occurs when we reduce symbols to mere terms and concepts.

On hearing or reading these reflections critical readers may be inclined to question the elaborate nature of these reflections and quote the roman poet Horace: *parturient montes, nascetur ridiculus mus*.

⁴⁴ The argument is not so much against object as such but against the process that objectifies a symbol.

⁴⁵ Panikkar, 1980, p. 123.

Mountains will labour: what's born? A ridiculous mouse!⁴⁶ While I would agree with all this my plea is: If in the process the ridiculous mouse is able to draw our attention to the inexhaustibility of the sacred mountain of meaning and make us go through the dry desert of concepts to the world of living symbols then the effort will not be in vain. After all what is the ultimate aim of literature, poetry, philosophy and religion if not the discovery and above all, the experience of Man's finitude vis à vis the unfathomable mystery of reality?

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- D'Sa, Francis X., «Re-Searching the Divine. The World of Symbol and the Language of Metaphor», in *Interrelations and Interpretation. Philosophical Reflections on Science, Religion and Hermeneutics in Honour of Richard De Smet, S.J. and Jean de Marneffe, S.J.*, ed. Job Kozhamthadam, New Delhi, Intercultural Publications, 1997, pp. 141-173.
- Frauwallner, E. (trad.), *Śabarabhāṣyam in his Materialien zur ältesten Erkenntnislehre der Karmamīmāṃsā*, Wien, Hermann Böhlau Nachf, 1968.
- Heisenberg, W., *Der Teil und das Ganze: Gespräche im Umkreis der Atomphysik*, Zurich, Buchclub Ex Libris, 1969.
- Horace, *Ars poetica*, http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Latin/HoraceArsPoetica.htm#_Toc98156243 [7 February 2013].
- Mendonca, C., *Dynamics of Symbol and Dialogue: Interreligious Education in India. The Relevance of Raimon Panikkar's Intercultural Challenge*, Münster, Lit, 2001.
- Panikkar, R., *Worship and Secular Man. An essay on the liturgical nature of man, considering Secularization as a major phenomenon of our time and Worship as an apparent fact of all times. A study towards an integral anthropology*, New York/London, Orbis Book/Darton, Longman & Todd, 1973.
- Panikkar, R., (trad., ed.) *The Vedic Experience: Mantramañjārī. An Anthology of the Vedas for Modern Man and Contemporary Celebration*, London, Darton, Longman & Todd, 1977.
- Panikkar, R., «The Texture of a Text: In Response to Paul Ricoeur», *Point of Contact*, II, 1, New York, 1978, pp. 51-64.
- Panikkar, R., «Words and Terms», in *Esistenza, Mito, Ermeneutica (Scritti per Enrico Castelli)*, ed. M. M. Olivetti, Archivio di Filosofia II, Padova, CEDAM, 1980, pp. 117-133.

⁴⁶http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Latin/HoraceArsPoetica.htm#_Toc98156243 (Ep. II.3, pp. 136-139) [7 February 2013].

- Panikkar, R., *Myth, Faith & Hermeneutics. Cross-Cultural Studies*, New Jersey, Paulist Press 1978 (Indian edition: Bangalore, Asian Trading Corporation 1983).
- Panikkar, R., *The Cosmotheandric Experience: Emerging Religious Consciousness*, ed. Scott Eastham, Maryknoll/New York. Orbis Books, 1993.
- Panikkar, R., «A Self-Critical Dialogue», in *The Intercultural Challenge of Raimon Panikkar*, ed. Joseph Prabhu, New York, Orbis, 1996, pp. 251-252.

