

A secular age? Reflections on Taylor and Panikkar

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Abstract During the last few years two major volumes have been published, both greatly revised versions of earlier Gifford Lectures: Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age* (2007) and Raimon Panikkar’s *The Rhythm of Being* (2010). The two volumes are similar in some respects and very dissimilar in others. Both thinkers complain about the glaring blemishes of the modern, especially the contemporary age; both deplore above all a certain deficit of religiosity. The two authors differ, however, both in the details of their diagnosis and in their proposed remedies. Taylor views the modern age—styled as “secular age”—as marked by a slide into secular agnosticism, into “exclusive humanism”, and above all into an “immanent frame” excluding theistic “transcendence”. Although sharing the concern about “loss of meaning”, Panikkar does not find its source in the abandonment of (mono)theistic transcendence; on the contrary, both radical transcendence and agnostic immanence are responsible for the deficit of genuine faith. For him, recovery of faith requires an acknowledgment of our being in the world, as part of the “rhythm of being” happening in a holistic or “cosmotheandric” mode. In classical Indian terminology, while Taylor’s emphasis on the transcendence-immanence tension reflects ultimately a dualistic perspective (*dvaita*), Panikkar’s holistic notion of the rhythm of being captures the core of *Advaita* *Vedanta*.

Keywords Crisis of modernity · Immanent frame · Exclusive humanism · *Advaita* *Vedanta* · Secularism · Cosmotheandric vision

At least in the Western context, our age is commonly referred to as that of “modernity”—a term sometimes qualified as “late modernity” or “postmodernity.” Taken by

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itself, the term is nondescript; in its literal sense, it simply means a time of novelty or innovation. Hence, something needs to be added to capture the kind of novelty involved. To pinpoint this innovation, modernity is also referred to as the “age of reason” or the age of enlightenment and science—in order to demarcate the period from a prior age presumably characterized by unreason, metaphysical speculation, and intellectual obscurantism or darkness. Seen in this light, modernity for a large number of people—including supporters of scientific and social progress—is a cause for rejoicing, celebration, and unrelenting promotion. As is well known, however, this chorus of support has for some time been accompanied by discordant voices pointing to the dark underside of modernity, evident in what Max Weber called the “disenchantment” of the world and others (more dramatically) the “death of God” or the “flight of the gods.” More recently, discontent has given rise to claims regarding an inherent “crisis” of modernity manifest in the slide toward materialism, consumerism, irreligion, and a general “loss of meaning.”¹

For present purposes I want to lift up for consideration two highly nuanced and philosophically challenging assessments of our modern condition: Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age* (of 2007) and Raimon Panikkar’s *The Rhythm of Being* (of 2010). As it happens, both texts are strongly revised versions of earlier Gifford Lectures (presented respectively in 1999 and 1989). Before proceeding, a word of caution: neither of the two thinkers belongs to one of the polarized camps—which means that neither is an uncritical “booster” or else a mindless “knocker” of the modern age.² Both thinkers share many things in common. Both complain about certain glaring blemishes of the modern, especially the contemporary period; both deplore above all a certain deficit of religiosity or spirituality. The differences between the two authors have to do mainly with the details of their diagnosis and proposed remedies. In Taylor’s view, the modern age—styled as “secular age”—appears marked by a slide into worldly agnosticism, into “exclusive humanism” and above all into an “immanent fame” excluding or marginalizing theistic “transcendence.” Although sharing the concern about “loss of meaning,” Panikkar does not find its source in the abandonment of (mono)theistic transcendence; nor does he locate this source in secularism or “secularity” per se—seeing that, in view of its temporality, faith is necessarily linked with a given age (or “*saeculum*”). Instead of stressing the dichotomy between immanence and transcendence, Panikkar focuses on the pervasive “oblivion of being” in our time, an oblivion which can only be overcome through a renewed remembrance of the divine as a holistic happening in a “cosmotheandric” mode.

¹ Concerning the “crisis of modernity” compare, e.g., Spengler (1918/1939), Guénon (1928/1962), Guardini (1950/1956), and Strauss (1964, pp. 41–54). Compare in this context the chapter “Global Modernization: Toward Different Modernities,” in my *Dialogue Among Civilizations: Some Exemplary Voices* (2002, pp. 85–104).

² In one of his previous writings, Taylor had distinguished between the “boosters” and the “knockers” of modernity. See his *The Ethics of Authenticity* (1992, pp. 11, 22–23).

A secular age

At the very beginning of his massive study, Taylor distinguishes between three kinds of secularity or “the secular”: “secularity 1” involving the retreat of faith from public life; “secularity 2” denoting a diminution or vanishing of faith among certain people; and “secularity 3” involving the erosion of the very conditions of possibility of shared faith. While in the first type, public spaces are assumed to be “emptied of God, or of any reference to ultimate reality,” and whereas in the second type secularity consists “in the falling off of religious belief and practice, in people turning away from God,” the third type involves a more pervasive change: namely, “a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace.” Taken in the third sense, secularity means more than the evacuation of public life or else the loss of a personal willingness to believe; rather, it affects “the whole context of understanding in which our moral, spiritual or religious experience and search takes place.” Viewed on this level, an age or a society would be secular or not “in virtue of the conditions of experience of and search for the spiritual.” As Taylor emphasizes, the focus of his study is on the last kind of secularity. In his words:

So I want to examine our society as secular in this third sense, which I could perhaps encapsulate in this way: the change I want to define and trace is one which takes us from a society in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one human possibility among others.... Belief in God is no longer axiomatic.³

In seeking to flesh out the meaning of secularity as a mode of modern experience, Taylor’s text very quickly introduces the notion of “exclusive humanism” or “self-sufficient humanism” characterized by a neglect of transcendence. An important criterion here is the notion of a “fullness of life” and whether this fullness can be reached by human resources alone or requires a step “beyond” or “outside.” “The big obvious contrast here,” we read, “is that for believers the account of the place of fullness requires reference to God, that is, something beyond human life and/or nature; where for unbelievers this is not the case.” Typically, for believers fullness or completion is received as a gift whereas for unbelievers the source of completion resides “within.” Appeal to internal resources can take many forms. In modernity, the appeal is frequently to the power of reason and rational knowledge. However, self-sufficiency can also be predicated on a “rigorous naturalism.” In that case, the sources of fullness are not transcendent, but are to be “found in Nature, or in our own inner depths, or in both.” Examples of such naturalism are provided by “the Romantic critique of disengaged reason, and most notably certain ecological ethics of our day, particularly deep ecology.” Other forms of self-sufficiency or internal self-reliance can be found in versions of Nietzscheanism and existentialism which draw empowerment “from the sense of our courage and greatness in being able to face the irremediable, and carry on nonetheless.” A further modality can be detected in recent modes of post-modernism

³ Taylor (2007, pp. 2–3).

which, while dismissive of claims of self-sufficient reason, yet “offer no outside source for the reception of power.”⁴

In subsequent remarks the distinction between inside and outside (“within-without”) is further sharpened by the invocation of the binaries of immanence/transcendence and natural/supra-natural. “The shift in background, or better the disruption of the earlier background,” Taylor writes, “comes best to light when we focus on certain distinctions we make today: for instance, that between the immanent and the transcendent, the natural and the super-natural.... It is this shift in background, in the whole context in which we experience and search for fullness, that I am calling the coming of a secular age, in my third sense ... [and] that I want to describe, and perhaps also (very partially) explain.” In general terms, modernity for Taylor assumes the character of a “secular age” once priority is granted to immanence over transcendence and to a self-sufficient humanism over divine interventions. “The great invention of the [modern] West,” he writes, “was that of an immanent order of Nature whose working could be systematically understood and explained on its own terms.” This notion of immanence involves denying, or at least questioning, “any form of interpenetration between the things of Nature, on the one hand, and the ‘supernatural,’ on the other.” Seen from this angle, he adds, “defining religion in terms of the distinction immanent/transcendent is a move tailor-made for our culture.” From a humanist perspective, the basic question becomes “whether people recognize something beyond or transcendent to their lives.”⁵

At the core of the modern secular shift, for Taylor, is the issue of human fulfillment or “flourishing,” that is, the question “what constitutes a fulfilled life?” At this point, an intriguing radicalism comes to the fore: in the sense that not only the secular goals of fulfillment are chastised, but the very idea of human flourishing is called into question. In earlier periods, he comments, it was still possible to assume that the best life involved our seeking “a good which is beyond, in the sense of being independent of human flourishing.” In that case, the highest, most adequate human striving could include our aiming “at something other than human flourishing.” Under the aegis of an exclusive or self-sufficient humanism, the possibility of such higher striving has atrophied and even vanished. Differently phrased: “secularity 3” in Taylor’s sense came along together with the possibility and even probability of exclusive humanism. In fact, he states, one could offer this “one-line description” of the difference between earlier times and the secular age: “a secular age is one in which the eclipse of all goals beyond human flourishing becomes conceivable.” Here is the crucial link “between secularity and a self-sufficing humanism.” In traditional religion, especially in Christianity, a different path was offered: namely, “the possibility of transformation ... which takes us beyond merely human perfection.” To follow this path, it was needful to rely on “a higher power, the transcendent God.” Seen in this light, Christian faith requires “that

⁴ Ibid., pp. 8–10. The comment on existentialism obviously is tailored to the writings of Albert Camus. Regarding deep ecology, the judgment is modified a few pages later (p. 19) where we read that “there are attempts to reconstruct a non-exclusive humanism on a non-religious basis, which one sees in various forms of deep ecology.”

⁵ Ibid., pp. 13–16.

we see our life as going beyond the bounds of its ‘natural’ scope between birth and death; our lives extend beyond ‘this life’.”⁶

It cannot be my ambition here to recapitulate Taylor’s complex and lengthy tome; suffice it for present purposes to draw attention briefly to a central chapter dealing with the noted binary tension: the chapter titled “The Immanent Frame.” At this point, the notion of an exclusive humanism is reformulated in terms of a “buffered self.” According to Taylor, what modern secularity chiefly entails is “the replacement of a porous self by the buffered self,” a self that begins to find “the idea of spirits, moral forces, causal powers with a purposive bent, close to incomprehensible.” Buffering here involves “interiorization,” that is, a withdrawal into “an inner realm of thought and feeling to be explored.” Examples of this inward turn are said to be Romanticism, the “ethic of authenticity,” and similar moves prompting us to “conceive ourselves as having inner depths.” A corollary of this turn is “the atrophy of earlier ideas of cosmic order” and the rise of individual self-reliance and self-development, especially of an “instrumental individualism” exploiting worldly resources to its own exclusive benefit. Aggregating the various changes or mutations occurring in secular modernity, Taylor arrives at this succinct formulation: “So, the buffered identity of the disciplined [self-reliant] individual moves in a constructed social space, where instrumental rationality is a key value and time is pervasively secular [as clock time]. All of this makes up what I want to call ‘the immanent frame’.” There is one important background feature which also needs to be taken into account: namely, that “this frame constitutes a ‘natural’ order, to be contrasted to a ‘supernatural’ one, an ‘immanent’ world, over against a possible ‘transcendent’ one.”⁷

As Taylor recognizes, the boundary between the two “worlds” is not always sharply demarcated. Although ready to “slough off the transcendent,” the immanent order occasionally makes concessions to the former. This happens in various forms of “civil religion,” and also in vaguely spiritual movements or expressions like Pentecostalism or “Romantic forms of art.” However, such concessions are at best half-hearted, and do not basically challenge or impede the “moral attraction” of immanence, of this-worldliness, of materialism and naturalism. As Taylor remarks with regard to the latter: “We can see in the naturalistic rejection of the transcendent ... the ethical outlook which pushes to closure” in immanence, especially when the rejection is coupled with wholesale trust in modern natural science and associated technologies. Undergirded by this trust, the entire growth of modern civilization can be seen “as synonymous with the laying out of a closed immanent frame.” To be sure, the text insists, the “moral attraction” of immanence is not absolutely compelling or pre-ordained; it only prevails as a dominant pull or possibility, leaving room for other recessed alternatives. Resisting the dominant frame, some individuals find themselves placed in the cauldron of competing pulls—a cauldron giving rise sometimes to the striving for a radical exodus, accomplished through a stark (Kierkegaardian) “leap of faith.” How-

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 16, 19–20.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 539–542. In another succinct formulation he states (p. 566): “Modern science, along with the many other facets described—the buffered identity, with its disciplines, modern individualism, with its reliance on instrumental reason and action in secular time—make up the immanent frame.... Science, modern individualism, instrumental reason, secular time, all seem proofs of the truth of immanence.”

ever, this personal experience of cross-pressures does not call into question the basic structure of secular modernity. What his study is trying to bring to the fore, Taylor concludes, is the “constitution of [secular] modernity” in terms of the emphasis on “‘closed’ or ‘horizontal’ worlds” which leave little or no place for “the ‘vertical’ or ‘transcendent’.”⁸

Without doubt, Taylor’s *A Secular Age* is an intellectual *tour de force* as well as a spirited defense of religious faith (seen as openness to a transcendent realm). In an age submerged in the maelstrom of materialism, consumerism, and mindless self-indulgence, his book has the quality of a wake-up call, of a stirring plea for transformation and “*metanoia*.” Nevertheless, even while appreciating the cogency of this plea, the reader cannot quite escape the impression of a certain one-dimensionality. Despite repeated rejections of a “subtraction story” (treating modernity simply as a culture minus faith), the overall account presented in the book is one of diminution or impoverishment: leading from a holistic framework hospitable to transcendence to an “immanent frame” hostile to it. Surely, this is not the only story that can be told—and probably not the most persuasive one. In Taylor’s presentation, immanence and transcendence, this world and the world “beyond,” seem to be immutable binary categories exempt from change. Clearly, there is the possibility of another (more compelling) narrative: a story where immanence and transcendence, the human and the divine, encounter each other in ever new ways, leading to profound transformations on both (or all) sides. Curiously, Taylor’s own earlier writings had been leaning more in that direction. One of his best-known earlier works, *Sources of the Self*, narrated the development of human selfhood from antiquity to modernity in a nuanced manner not reducible to a slide from porousness to buffered closure. Very little of this story remains in *A Secular Age*. In a similar manner, the “ethics of authenticity” (highlighted in one of his earlier books) now seems to be just another synonym for modern buffering and self-sufficiency. Even the move toward personal religiosity—celebrated earlier in the case of William James—now seems to be relegated to a marginal gloss on the “immanent frame.” Hardly an echo seems to be left of the “thanks to Voltaire and others”—extended in his “Marianist Lecture”—for “allowing us to live the gospel in a purer way,” free of the “often bloody forcing of conscience” marking previous centuries.⁹

As it seems to me, one of the more curious and troubling aspects of the book is the determined privileging of the “vertical” or “transcendent” dimension over the lateral or “horizontal worlds.” Even if one were to grant the atrophy of transcendence, modernity styled as a “secular age” surely has witnessed important “horizontal,” social-political developments by no means alien to a religious register: the demolition of ancient caste structures, the struggles against imperialism, the emancipation of slaves, the steady process of democratization promising equal treatment for people without regard for

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 543, 547–549, 555–556. Taylor’s discussion of the different “frames” or “worlds” is often quite ambiguous—to the point of jeopardizing the distinction itself. Thus, with regard to naturalism we read at one point (p. 548): “Belonging to the earth, the sense of our dark genesis, can also be part of Christian faith, but only when it has broken with certain features of the immanent frame, especially the distinction nature/supernature.”

⁹ See Taylor (1999, pp. 16–19). Compare also his *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (1989), and *The Ethics of Authenticity* (1992).

gender, race, and religion. Strangely, in a book seeking to distill the essence of Western modernity, these and similar developments occupy a minor or shadowy place, being eclipsed by the accent on verticality (heavily indebted to certain monotheistic creeds). The accent is all the more surprising in the context of a largely Christian narrative, given the traditional linkage of that faith with embodiment and “incarnation.”¹⁰ The downgrading or relative dismissal of the horizontal has clear repercussions with regard to “humanism” and the divine-human relationship. The conception of an “exclusive humanism” seems to leave ample room for a more open and non-exclusive type. Yet, despite an occasional acknowledgment of the possibility of non-exclusiveness, the point is not further developed or explored. Equally bypassed or sidelined is the possibility of a symbiosis of the divine, the human, and “nature”—a triadic structure requiring resolute openness on all sides. At one point, Taylor ponders the deleterious impact of a certain “non-religious anti-humanism” (associated mainly with Nietzsche and his followers). However, his own privileging of verticality conjures up the specter of a radically religious anti-humanism—a specter bound to be disturbing in the context of the current vogue of fundamentalist rhetoric.¹¹

The rhythm of being

To some extent, the preceding paragraph can serve as gateway to the work of Raimon Panikkar, the renowned Spanish-Indian philosopher and sage (who passed away on August 26, 2010). Among many other intellectual initiatives, Panikkar is known for his endorsement of a triadic structure of Being—the so-called “cosmotheandric” conception—in which God (or the divine), human beings, and nature (or cosmos) are linked in indissoluble correlation or symbiosis. Seen from the angle of this conception, the radical separation or opposition between transcendence and an “immanent frame” seems far-fetched if not simply unintelligible. It is fairly clear that Panikkar could not or would not have written a book titled *A Secular Age* with a focus on immanentization. For one thing, the two terms of the title for him are synonymous—seeing that “age” is equivalent to the Latin “*saeculum*.” More importantly, the divine (or transcendent) in Panikkar’s view cannot be divorced from the temporal (or “secular”) without jeopardizing or destroying the intimate divine-human relation and thereby the mentioned triadic structure. The distinctive and unconventional meaning of secularism or secularity is manifest in a number of his early writings which remain important in the present context. Thus, his book *Worship and Secular Man* (of 1973) put forward this provocative thesis: “Only worship can prevent secularization from becoming inhu-

¹⁰ At one point, Taylor complains that we have moved “from an era in which religious life was more ‘embodied’, where the presence of the sacred could be enacted in ritual ... into one which is more ‘in the Footnote 10 continued mind’.” As a corollary of this move, “official Christianity has gone through what we can call an ‘excarnation’, a transfer of embodied, ‘enfleshed’ forms of religious life, to those which are more ‘in the head’.” See *A Secular Age*, p. 554.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 19. In his stress on verticality, Taylor seems to have been influenced by a certain “transcendentalist” strand in French postmodernism, manifest especially in the writings of the later Jacques Derrida (under the influence of Emmanuel Levinas and his notion of the radically “Other”). For a different, more “open” conception of humanism compare, e.g., Maritain (1973) and Heidegger (1977).

man, and only secularization can save worship from being meaningless.” To which he added this equally startling comment: “Now, what is emerging in our days, and what may be a ‘hapax phenomenon’, a unique occurrence in the history of humankind, is—paradoxically—not secularism, but the sacred quality of secularism.”¹²

Panikkar has never abandoned this provocative thesis; it still pervades powerfully his later writings, including *The Rhythm of Being*. As he notes in the Preface to that book (written on Pentecost 2009), the original title of his Gifford Lectures was “The Dwelling of the Divine in the Contemporary World”—a phrase surely not far removed from the notion of sacred secularity. Although for various reasons the original title was changed, the “leading thread” of the book—he adds—“continues to be the same.” What characterizes this “leading thread,” despite textual revisions, is the idea of a radical “relationality” or “relativity” involving the three basic dimensions of reality: cosmos (nature), human beings, and God (or the divine)—where each of these dimensions is seen not as a static essence but as an active and dynamic participant in the ongoing transformation of reality or “Being.” As Panikkar states, what he intends to convey in his book is a new sense of “*creatio continua*” in which each one of us, in St. Bonaventure’s phrase, is a “co-creator.” A crucial feature of the intended relationality is the close linkage between the “temporal” and the “eternal,” or between time and Being. “Time,” we read, “is not an accident to life, or to Being ... Each existence is *tempiternal* ... and with this observation we have already reached our topic of the ‘Rhythm of Being’, which is ever old and ever new.” Instead of bogging down in irredeemable ruptures and dichotomies, this rhythm proceeds in the modality of mediation (*utrum*, both, as well as) and thus in “the *advaitic* language.”¹³

Along with other ruptures and dichotomies, *The Rhythm of Being* also refuses to accept the split between the “vertical” and “horizontal” dimensions of reality. In fact, despite its basically philosophical and meditative character, the book elaborates more explicitly on present-day social-political ills than does the Canadian political thinker. For Panikkar, dealing with the “rhythm of Being” cannot be a mode of escapism but involves a struggle about “the very meaning” of life and reality—a struggle which has to be attentive to all dimensions of reality, even the least appealing. “In a world of crisis, upheaval, and injustice,” he asks, “can we disdainfully distance ourselves from the plight of the immense majority of the peoples of the world and dedicate ourselves to ‘speculative’ and/or ‘theoretical’ issues? Do we not thereby fall prey to the powers of the status quo?” In language which becomes ever more urgent and pleading, he continues:

Can we really do “business as usual” in a world in which half of our fellow-beings suffer from man-made causes? Is our theory not already flawed by the praxis from which it proceeds? Are we not puppets in the hands of an oppressive system, lackeys to the powers that be, hypocrites who succumb to the allure and flattery of money, prestige, and honors? Is it not escapism to talk about the Trinity while the world falls to pieces and its people suffer all around us? ... Have we

¹² Panikkar (1973, pp. 1–2, 10–13). Compare also the chapter “Rethinking Secularism—With Raimon Panikkar,” in my *Dialogue among civilizations: Some exemplary voices* (2002, pp. 185–200).

¹³ Panikkar (2010, pp. xxvi–xxx, xxxii).

seen the constant terror under which the “natives” and the “poor” are forced to live? What do we really know about the hundreds of thousands killed, starved, tortured, and *desapericidos*, or about the millions of displaced and homeless people who have become the statistical commonplace of the mass media?¹⁴

For Panikkar, we cannot remain bystanders in the affairs of the world, but have to become involved—without engaging in mindless or self-promoting activism. In a disjointed and disoriented world, what is needed above all is a genuine search for the truth of Being and the meaning of life—which basically involves a search for justice and the “good life” (or the goodness of life). “We are all co-responsible for the state of the world,” Panikkar affirms. In the case of intellectuals or philosophers, this responsibility entails that they “ought to be incarnated in their own times and have an exemplary function,” which in turn means the obligation “to search for truth (something that has saving power) and not to chase after irrelevant verities.” Genuine search for truth and life, however, proceeds from a lack or a perceived need which provides the compelling motivation for the quest: “Without this thirst for ‘living waters’,” Panikkar writes, “there is no human life, no dynamism, no change. Thirst comes from lack of water.” On this level, we are not dealing with epistemological, logical, or purely academic questions. Quest for life and its truth derives ultimately from “our existential thirst for the reign of justice,” not from a passing interest or curiosity: “We are dealing with something that is more than an academic challenge. It is a spiritual endeavor to live the life that has been given us.”¹⁵

The quest for life and its meaning, in Panikkar’s presentation, is not simply a human initiative or an individual “project” (in Sartre’s sense); nor is it an external destiny or a fate imposed from on high. The reason is that, in the pursuit of the quest, the human seeker is steadily transformed, just as the goal of the search is constantly reformulated or refined. This is where Panikkar’s “holistic” or non-dualistic approach comes into play, his notion of a constantly evolving and interacting triadic structure. As he writes: “I would like to help awaken the dignity and responsibility of the individual by providing a holistic vision,” and this can only happen if, in addition to our human freedom, we remain attentive to the “*freedom of Being* on which our human and cosmic dignity is grounded.” From a holistic angle, the different elements of reality are not isolated fragments but interrelated partners in a symphony or symbiosis where they are neither identical nor divorced. “Each entity,” Panikkar states, “is not just a part, but an image or icon of the Whole, as minimal and imperfect as that image may be.” Holism thus stands opposed to the Cartesian dualistic (subject/object) epistemology, without subscribing to a dialectical synthesis where differences are “sublated” in a universal (Hegelian) system. Importantly, holism does not and cannot equal “totalism” or “totalitarianism”

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 3–4. As he adds somberly (p. 4): “Today’s powers, though more anonymous and more diffused, are quite as cruel and terrible as the worst monsters of history. What good is a merely intellectual denunciation in countries where we can say anything we like because it is bound to remain ineffectual.... There is little risk in denouncing provided we do not move a finger.”

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 4–5. In this context, Panikkar offers some very instructive asides (p. 5): “Now the foremost way to communicate life is to live it; but this life is neither an exclusively public domain, nor merely private property. Neither withdrawing from the world nor submerging ourselves in it is the responsible human attitude.”

because no one can have a grasp or overview of the totality or the “Whole.” “No single person,” we read, “can reasonably claim to master a global point of departure. No individual exhausts the totality of possible approaches to the real.” For Panikkar, the most adequate idiom in which to articulate such holism is the Indian language of Advaita Vedanta: “*Advaita* offers the adequate approach ... [because it] entails a cordial order of intelligibility, of an *intellectus* that does not proceed dialectically.” Different from rationalistic demonstration, the *advaitic* order is “intrinsically pluralistic.”¹⁶

By overcoming Cartesian epistemology, *advaitic* holism inaugurates a close relation between human mind and reality, or (in different language) between “thinking” and “Being.” In this relation, thought not only thinks *about* Being (as an external object), but Being penetrates thinking as its animating ground. As Panikkar states pointedly: “The underlying problem is that of thinking and Being.” What is conjured up by this problem is the Vedantic conception of “*atman–braham*” or else the Thomistic formula “*anima quodammodo omnia*.” Another, more general idiom is that of ontology. In Panikkar’s words: “The consecrated word for what we were pondering about the Whole is precisely ‘Being’—and we shall not avoid this word any longer.” At this point, the text offers a passage which is not only evocative of, but directly congruent with Heideggerian formulations. “*Thinking ‘thinks Being’*,” we read. “Being begets thinking; one might even risk saying: Being ‘beings thinking’ ” (in line with Heidegger’s phrase that Being “calls forth” thinking). “Thinking is such only,” the passage continues, “if it is permeated by Being. Thinking is an activity of Being. Being thinks; otherwise thinking would be nothing.” This does not mean, of course, that human thinking can ever exhaust Being—which would result in “totalism” or totalization. Rather, thinking and Being are responsive to each other in a rhythmic “complementarity” or a spirited embrace:

The vision of the concrete in the Whole and the Whole in the concrete is, in fact, another way of saying that the relationship is rhythmic. Rhythm is not an ‘eternal return’ in a static repetition ... [but] rather the vital circle in the dance between the concrete and the Whole in which the concrete takes an ever-new form of the Whole.¹⁷

For human beings, participation in this dance means not only light-hearted entertainment, but involvement in a transformative struggle to overcome selfishness or possessive self-centeredness. Panikkar speaks in this context of a “purification of the heart” which is needed in order to join the dance. He quotes at this point the words of Hugo of St. Victor: “The way to ascend to God is to descend into oneself”; and also the parallel statement by Richard of St. Victor: “Let man ascend through himself above himself.” What is involved here is not merely an epistemic principle, nor a

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 6–7, 17, 23–24. As he adds (p. 24): One must “constantly be on guard against one of the most insidious dangers that bedevils such endeavors: the totalitarian temptation. My attempt is holistic, not global; I am not offering a system.”

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 22, 32–33. As the text adds a bit later (p. 51): “Being is not a thing. There is nothing ‘outside’ Being. Hence, the Rhythm of Being can only express the rhythm that Being itself is.” For Heidegger’s formulations see his “Letter on Humanism” (1977), esp. pp. 235–236; and *What is Called Thinking?* [rather: What Calls for Thinking?], 1968.

purely deontological duty, but “an ontological requirement.” As Panikkar stresses, the issue here is not esoteric nor a private whim but simply this: that we shall not discover our real situation, collectively as well as individually, “if our hearts are not pure, if our lives are not in harmony within ourselves, with our surroundings, and ultimately with the universe [Being] at large.” The text here adds a passage that can serve as the passkey to Panikkar’s entire vision: “Only when the heart is pure are we in harmony with the real, in tune with reality, able to hear its voice, detect its dynamism, and truly ‘speak’ its truth, having become adequate to the movement of Being, the Rhythm of Being.” The passage refers to the Chinese *Chung Yung* (in Ezra Pound’s translation) saying: “Only the most absolute sincerity under heaven can effect any change,” and adds: “The spiritual masters of every age agree that only when the waters of our spirit are tranquil can they reflect reality without deforming it.”¹⁸

What becomes clear in this context is that some of Panikkar’s key notions—like the “cosmotheandric” vision or “sacred secularity”—are not simply neutral-descriptive devices but are imbued with a dynamic, transformative potency. As one should note, however—and this is crucial—his notions do not reflect a bland optimism or trust in a “better future,” but are based on “hope”: which is a hope “of the invisible,” a hope for a promised possibility. With regard to “sacred secularity,” this possibility is not an empty pipe dream but is supported by a novel phenomenon (a *novum*) in our time: “This *novum* does not take refuge in the highest by neglecting the lowest; it does not make a separation by favoring the spiritual and ignoring the material; it does not search out eternity at the expense of temporality.” Differently phrased: the *novum* consists in a growing attentiveness to holism in lieu of the customary polarities (of *this* world and the *other* world, the inner and the outer, the secular and the divine). A still further way to express the *novum* is the growing awareness of the “Rhythm of Being” and the growing willingness to participate in that rhythm. What is becoming manifest, we read, is that “we all participate in Rhythm,” and that “Rhythm is another name for Being and Being is Trinity.” The last formulation refers again to the triadic or “cosmotheandric” structure of reality. For, Panikkar states, “rhythm is intrinsically connected with any activity of the gods, men, and nature.” In more traditional language, one might say that rhythm is “the cosmotheandric order of the universe, the *perichoresis* (*circuminsessio*, mutual in-dwelling) of the radical Trinity.”¹⁹

As in the case of Taylor’s *A Secular Age*, it cannot be my aim here to submit Panikkar’s entire volume to reflective review and scrutiny. A few additional points must suffice. One point concerns the traditional conception of monotheism. The notion of “*perichoresis*”—coupled with the accent on the “meta-transcendental” status of Being—does not seem to accord well with monotheistic “transcendence.” In fact, Panikkar’s text subjects the conception to strong critique. As he writes at one point: “I suspect that the days of unqualified theisms are not going to be bright.” What

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 34–35.

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 10, 36, 38–39, 42. Somewhat later (p. 52) the text adds: “Rhythm is a *meta-transcendental* quality—that is, a property that belongs to every being as Being. Rhythm adds nothing to Being, but only expresses a property of Being qua Being. If truth is considered a transcendental because it expresses Being as intelligible, that is, in relation to the intellect, rhythm belongs to Being considered not in relation to the intelligence or the will, but in relation to its totality [or Whole].” This view is said to be also in accord with “the *advaitic* vision of the Rhythm of Being.”

troubles Panikkar, apart from philosophical considerations, is the implicit connection of monotheism with a heteronomous command structure (“God, King, President, Police”). “The titles of King and Lord,” we read, “fit the monotheistic God quite well, and conversely, the human king could easily be the representative of God, and his retinue a copy of the heavenly hierarchies.” This is the gist of “political theology” (so-called). To be sure, traditional hierarchies no longer prevail—despite recurrent attempts at constructing “theocracies.” What is required in the context of modern democracy is a radical rethinking of the monotheistic command structure. In Panikkar’s words: “Regardless of certain forms of fundamentalism, both Christianity and Judaism clearly show that human freedom and love of neighbor belong to the *kernel* of their message.” This means that any “revealed” monotheism must ultimately acknowledge its intrinsic reference to its “human reception” (and hence to “*circuminsessio*”). Differently phrased: Divine revelation “has to fall on human grounds in order to be a belief for humans.” This belief is “a human experience, humanly interpreted, and humanly received into the collective consciousness of a culture at a given time.” Summarizing his view, Panikkar writes:

My position ... is neither naively iconoclastic nor satisfied with a reformed monotheism. It recognizes the valid insight of belief in God, but at the same time it acknowledges that God is not the only symbol for that third dimension we call the Divine, and it attempts to deepen the human experience of the Divine by formulating it more convincingly for our times.²⁰

In a central chapter of the book, titled “The Dwelling of the Divine” (capturing the originally intended title of the Gifford Lectures), Panikkar returns to the central meaning of the triadic structure understood as mutual in-dwelling. As he reaffirms, one-sided theisms “no longer seem to be able to satisfy the most profound urges of the contemporary sensibilities.” What is coming into view instead is “*perichoresis*” seen as radical relationality where “everything is permeated by everything else.” Seen from this angle, “man is ‘more’ than just an individual being, the Divine ‘different’ from a Supreme Lord, and the world ‘other’ than raw material to be plundered for utility or profit.” This view can be grasped neither in the language of transcendence nor that of immanence, because “we cannot even think” one without the other. Thus, where does the Divine dwell? “I would say,” Panikkar states, “that the space of man is in God in much the same way as the space of God is in man.” From this perspective, man and God are not two separable, independent substances: “There is no real *two* encompassing man and God ..., but they are not *one* either. Man and God are neither *one* nor *two*.” This, again, is the language of “*advaitic* intuition” (perhaps of Heideggerian “*Unterschied*”). *Advaita*, we are told here, does not simply mean “monism,” but rather “the overcoming of dualistic dialectics by means of introducing love [or wisdom] at the ultimate level of reality.” Regarding the trinitarian structure, Panikkar takes pains to

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 110, 128, 133–135. In an intriguing aside he adds (p. 135): “The hypothesis I would advance is that Western, mainly Christian and later Muslim monotheism, is a blend of biblical monotheism and the Hellenic mind represented mainly by Plotinus ... Neither Plato nor Aristotle ... was a strict monotheist.” For a critique of (imperial-style) political theology see the chapter “The Secular and the Sacred: Whither Political Theology?,” in my *Integral Pluralism: Beyond Culture Wars* (2010, pp. 45–66).

broaden the conception beyond traditional Christian theology. Both “esoteric Judaism and esoteric Islam,” he notes, are familiar with the threefold structure of the Divine. Thus, Philo of Alexandria interpreted the vision of Abraham and his three “visitors” in a trinitarian fashion. The Muslim mystic Ibn Arabi was even more explicit when he wrote: “My beloved is three/-three yet only one;/many things appear as three/which are no more than one.” And the Chinese Taoist Yang Hsuing explained the “great mystery” as constituting simultaneously “the way of Heaven, the way of Earth, and the way of Man.”²¹

Toward the end of his book, Panikkar returns to the relation of meditation and praxis; of thinking and doing in a transformative process. As he writes: “The task of transforming the cosmos is not achieved by a merely passive attitude nor by sheer activism.” What is needed is a “synergy” in which human beings are seen neither as designing engineers nor as victims: “The world does not ‘go’ independently from us. We are also active factors in the destiny of the cosmos. Otherwise, discourse about the dignity of man, his ‘divinization’ or divine character is an illusion.” Seen from an *advaitic* angle, “man” is a “microcosmos” and even a “microtheos.” Hence, human participation in the rhythm of the cosmos means “a sharing in the divine dimension” or what is sometimes called “salvation history.” Participation in this dynamism is indeed a striving for a “better world”—but a striving where the latter is “neither the dream of an earthly paradise nor [a retreat into] the inner self alone,” but rather a struggle for “a world with less hatred and more love, with less violence and more justice.” For Panikkar, this struggle is urgent because the situation of our world today is “tragic” and “serious enough to call for radical measures.” Ultimately, the struggle involves a quest for the “meaning of Life” which will never be found through selfish exploits or violent conquest, but only “in reaching that fullness of Life to which [*advaitic*] contemplation is the way.” As Panikkar finally pleads: “Plenitude, happiness, creativity, freedom, well-being, achievement etc. should not be given up but, on the contrary, should be enhanced by this transformative passage” from man-made history to a triadic redemptive story.²²

Concluding comments

The passage just cited highlights an important difference between Taylor and Panikkar. Basically, *The Rhythm of Being* is an affirmation and celebration of “life” in its deeper *advaitic* meaning. Panikkar uses as equivalents the terms “plenitude, happiness, creativity, freedom, well-being”; another customary term is “flourishing” (often used to translate Aristotle’s *eudaimonia*). At another point, he introduces the word “life” “at the level of Being, as a human experience of the Whole”; the term here means “not only *anima*, animal life, but *physis, natura, prakriti*” referring to “reality as a Whole.” On this issue, *A Secular Age* appears astonishingly (and unduly) dismissive. As Tay-

²¹ *The Rhythm of Being*, pp. 171–172, 174, 179, 216, 230.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 350–351, 359. As he asks dramatically (p. 358): “Who or what will put a halt to the lethal course of technocracy? More concretely: who will control armaments, polluting industries, cancerous consumerism, and the like? Who will put an end to the unbridled tyranny of money?”

lor notes in his Introduction, in modernity “we have moved from a world in which the place of fullness was understood as unproblematically outside or ‘beyond’ human life, to a conflicted age in which this construal is challenged by others which place it ... ‘within’ human life.” For Taylor (as mentioned before), the basic question raised by the modern secular age is “whether people [still] recognize something beyond or transcendent to their lives,” that is, whether their highest aim is “serving a good which is beyond, in the sense of independent of human flourishing” or involving “something other than human flourishing?” The truly believing or devout person is said to be marked by readiness “to make a profound inner break with the goals of flourishing in their own case”; unwillingness to do so is claimed to be the hallmark of “self-sufficient humanism.” In sum: “A secular age is one in which the eclipse of all goals beyond human flourishing becomes conceivable.”²³

Taylor’s comments here are puzzling—and also disturbing. They are disturbing in a time when many, presumably religious people are ready to throw away their lives in the hope of gaining quick access to the “beyond.” They are puzzling by jeopardizing the very meaning of faith. For most believers, salvation (or “*moksha*”) signifies precisely the highest level of flourishing and the ultimate fulfillment of life. What, then, does it mean for believers to seek something “outside or ‘beyond’ human life,” or something “transcendent to their lives”? Commonly, the antithesis of life is said to be death. Is God (the monotheistic God) then a God of death or of the dead? Clearly, this cannot be the case if we listen to Isaiah’s words: “The dead shall live, their bodies shall rise” (Isaiah 26:19). It becomes even less plausible if we recall Jesus’s provocative saying: “Follow me, and leave the dead to bury their dead” (Matthew 8:22), or his admonition that “the Father raises the dead and gives them life” (John 5:21). As it happens, Taylor himself waivers on this point and has to resort to ambivalent language. “There remains a fundamental tension in Christianity,” he writes. “Flourishing is good, nevertheless seeking it is not our ultimate goal. But even when we renounce it, we re-affirm it.” And he adds: “The injunction ‘Thy will be done’ is not equivalent to ‘Let humans flourish’, even though we know that God wills human flourishing.”²⁴

Rather than pursuing the contrast between the two thinkers, however, I want to emphasize here a commonality. While differing in many ways, neither Taylor nor Panikkar shows sympathy for theocracy or for any kind of religious triumphalism. Being turned off by the megalomania and massive power plays of our world, both thinkers are sensitive to new modes of religiosity—quite outside impressive spectacles and miraculous events. As it seems to me, one of the distinctive features of our age is not so much the “death of God” or the lack of faith, but rather the withdrawal and sheltering of the divine in recessed, inconspicuous phenomena of ordinary life. The Indian novelist Arundhati Roy has caught this aspect in her book *The God of Small Things*. Inspired by the Indian text, I tried to capture the sense of (what I called) “small wonder” in one of my earlier writings. Here are some lines:

²³ Ibid., pp. 270–271; *A Secular Age*, pp. 15–17, 19.

²⁴ *A Secular Age*, pp. 17–18. In the same context, Taylor makes some references to Buddhism—which, likewise, remain ambivalent and deeply contestable.

For too long, I fear, the divine has been usurped and co-opted by powerful elites for their own purposes.... For too long in human history the divine has been nailed to the cross of worldly power. However, in recent times, there are signs that the old alliance may be ending and that religious faith may begin to liberate itself from the chains of worldly manipulation. Exiting from the palaces and mansions of the powerful, faith—joined by philosophical wisdom—is beginning to take shelter in inconspicuous smallness, in those recesses of ordinary life unavailable to co-optation.²⁵

The change in religious sensibility is vividly displayed in modern art, especially in modern and contemporary painting. As we know, in medieval art the presence of the divine or the sacred was expressed symbolically by a golden background and the haloes surrounding sacred figures. Modern art cannot honestly, or without caricature, imitate or replicate this mode of expression. This does not mean that the sense of sacredness has been lost or abandoned. As it seems to me, that sense resurfaces in less obvious, more subdued ways: for example, in the miniature paintings of Paul Klee or else in a still life by Paul Cezanne. Viewed from this angle, modern secularism has a recessed meaning which is actually the very reverse of the popular “secularization thesis” (meaning the triumph of this-worldiness). The French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty—a strong admirer of Cezanne—had a phrase for it: “the invisible of the visible.” Seen against this background, the relation between the two books reviewed here—*A Secular Age* and *The Rhythm of Being*—acquires a new meaning. Perhaps, one might conjecture, the “secular age,” as portrayed by Taylor, functioned and functions as wholesome conduit, a clearing agent, to guide a more mature and sober humanity to the appreciation of the “rhythm of Being.” If this is so (at least in approximation), then it may be propitious to remember Hölderlin’s lines: “But where there is danger, a saving grace also grows.”²⁶

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²⁵ Dallmayr (2005, p. 4). See also Roy (1997).

²⁶ This is a free translation of Hölderlin’s lines: “Wo aber Gefahr ist, wächst das Rettende auch.” See Friedrich Hölderlin, “Patmos,” in *Poems and Fragments* (1966, pp. 462–463). Compare in this context Merleau-Ponty (1968); also his “Cezanne’s Doubt” (1964, pp. 9–25).

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