

# The True Ring Cannot Be Worn: A Panikkarian Way out of the Logic of the Three Rings

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*Abstract: The Parable of the Three Rings is famous in its versions by Boccaccio and Lessing. They share the fundamental idea that only one religion is true but human condition does not let us know which one is the true one. It is an inherently modern idea to stress on the limits of human knowledge while arguing against pure forms of skepticism and relativism. The result of the parable is friendship in both versions, yet the question of truth remains at the center of the conceptual framework underlying the stories. On the contrary, scholars started giving much more relevance to the ethical side of dialogue, so that interpersonal relationship is not just the result of a cognitive process. Personal encounter should be prior to the question of truth. This new approach is challenged by the nature of the relationship with the other. Should it be symmetrical and mutual? Views on dialogue inspired by Lévinas must answer negatively. If we want to keep the relevance of friendship we should rather prefer Buber's idea of dialogue. In our world, despite this, inequalities are such that symmetry and mutuality cannot be the standard condition of dialogue and we must be responsible in advance for the other (in the sense of Lévinasian servitude for the other). A mediation between these two standpoints can be found in Panikkar's notion of inter-in-dependence, as I shall argue. In fact, this notion combines the interdependence present in Buber's I-Thou relationship and the independence or separation stressed by Lévinas in the relation to the other understood in terms of relation between absolute terms.*

Keywords: Responsibility, Mutuality, Dialogue, Interculturality, Religious Diversity

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## Introduction

**S**tories can tell us much about a cultural tradition, but they can also open up new argumentative paths. The Parable of the Three Rings is a tale focused on a philosophical question: “Which of the three monotheistic

faiths is the true one?"<sup>1</sup> Its main and most renowned variants are by Giovanni Boccaccio and Gotthold Ephraim Lessing; they offer insight into how modernity thought of religious diversity. Yet there is a seemingly older version of the story which suggests a different way of addressing this question.<sup>2</sup> As this paper will try to show, the insight buried inside the text of this version can be translated into the terms of the current debate about interreligious dialogue. Philosophy of interreligious dialogue inspired by Martin Buber and Emmanuel Lévinas is nowadays granting priority to the ethical side of interfaith encounter, rather than to its alethic side. In this perspective, personal encounter should be prior to the question of truth, i.e. interfaith dialogue should be *with* someone rather than *on* something. The result is a change of the terms of the problem: "Which of the monotheistic faiths is the best one?"<sup>3</sup> The turn from Truth to Goodness overcomes every exclusivism, keeps some relevant aspects of the Modern Age mindset towards religious diversity, and is faced with the ethical issue concerning the nature of the relationship with the religious other. The latter issue sounds like this: "Is my responsibility towards the other infinite?" The meaning of the question is whether symmetry should prevail over asymmetry or asymmetry should be prior to mutuality in the relationship; views inspired by Buber are inclined to favor mutuality, while those inspired by Lévinas are committed to asymmetry and infinite responsibility, i.e. who enters the encounter ethically should be responsible for the other's reaction and never try to grasp the other by means of categories. It has been argued that Buber is actually not in conflict with Lévinas concerning the asymmetry of the ethical relationship, but this seems to apply only to the relationship with God through the encounter with the human other.<sup>4</sup> In the specific context of interreligious dialogue, the issue is not the need for keeping God's transcendence intact since it is a matter of whether shared responsibility could be the best option or not. A Christian standpoint should imply a larger amount of responsibility for the Christian side of the encounter, but even a protestant scholar in interreligious dialogue has remarked that both mutuality and responsibility are highly relevant

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<sup>1</sup> The question comes from Middle Ages, nowadays we should at least include Bahai Faith as a fourth monotheism (cf. Buck, "Bahá'í Contributions," 260–77, 262).

<sup>2</sup> The version is part of a collection titled *Il Novellino*. It was written after 1291, the date ranges between the late thirteenth century and the early fourteenth (cf. Shagrir, *The Parable of the Three Rings and the Idea of Religious Toleration in European Culture*, 89, 107).

<sup>3</sup> Generally put, "Which is the best religion?"

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Kelly, "Reciprocity and the Height of God: A Defence of Buber against Lévinas," 65–73.

monopoly on it, because the Mystery is infinite...To cultivate religious dialogue, the interdependence of all cultures and all men must be recognized.”<sup>65</sup> The conclusion is simple: “We know how to use things, but we do not know the mystery of reality: we must be humble.... True religiosity leads us to listen to others, because no one is self-sufficient.”<sup>66</sup> In short, we need even the ones who depend on us. Much more than in the passage on the “three dimensions of reality,” Panikkar gets close to Buber’s terminology when speaking about human condition in *Human Dialogue and Religious Interdependence*. Yet he never gives up the reference to uniqueness and inequality that is typical of Lévinas’ account of human condition. To sum up, Panikkar helps us to reactivate the best elements of ancient Indian emperor Asoka’s wisdom:

King Beloved by Gods Priyadarsin is honoring all sects: (both) ascetics and householders, with gifts and with honors of various kinds. But the Beloved by Gods does not value either gifts or honors so (highly) as (this), (viz.) that a promotion of the essentials of all sects should take place....its root is this, viz. guarding (one’s) speech, (i.e.) that neither praising one’s own sect nor blaming other sects should take place on improper occasion, or (that) it should be moderate in every case. But other sects ought to be duly honored in every way. If one is acting this, he is promoting his own sect and is benefiting other sects as well. If one is acting otherwise than thus, he is hurting his own sect and wronging other sects. For whosoever praises his own sect (or) blames other sects—all (this) out of pure devotion to his own sect, (i.e.) with the view of glorifying his own sect,—if he is acting thus, he rather injures his own sect very severely.<sup>67</sup>

## Conclusion

Cosmotheandric vision is not just connected to Panikkar’s inter-dependence view of dialogue. It implies ecosophy too, i.e. a nondualist ecology. The relationship between mankind and environment misses the cosmical dimension of nature lived by many religions and reduces it to a pure matter of science and climate policy, while the consideration of the dimension of mystery

<sup>65</sup> Panikkar, “Human Dialogue,” 143.

<sup>66</sup> Panikkar, “Human Dialogue,” 144.

<sup>67</sup> Hultzs, ed., *Inscriptions of Asoka*, 65. The translation is slightly modified. On the relevance of this approach for interreligious matters, see Colagrossi, “Un’Altra India. Il Dialogo Interreligioso nella Tradizione Indiana: Da Aśoka a Gandhi,” 28–40.

could reactivate the awareness of the inter-in-dependence among environment, mankind and the divine.<sup>68</sup> Thus, a Panikkarian account of interreligious encounter can enrich the goal suggested by Buber for it, namely the construction of a community that goes beyond religious diversity while preserving it: such a communion should and could include environment itself. Therefore, interreligious dialogue might become the key for a new ecology and play an incisive role in taking care of our planet—a more realistic objective than interfaith encounter as a prevention of wars.<sup>69</sup> Despite this, it remains true that cosmotheandric experience cannot be preliminary to the practice of interreligious dialogue. It could be the outcome, but it cannot be the input. A first step in introducing inter-in-dependence as a premise to dialogue and as a way to conduct it can be made in terms of *philosophy as comparison*: Giangiorgio Pasqualotto describes this practice, exemplified by Nishida Kitarō's work, as happening "in the awareness that none of the 'terms' of the relation (himself as a questioning subject, and the two different domains assumed as speculative touchstones) exists and functions alone, independently from the other two."<sup>70</sup> The second step is provided by François Jullien's notion of 'gap' (*écart*).<sup>71</sup> The thinking of alterity in terms of gap is an alternative both to the concept of difference and to the godlike aura of the other:

I thus stress on the virtue of the *gap* that generates the *between*, and of the *between* that generates the *other* because I believe that the notion of alterity is nowadays menaced from two sides. Either it is left to a sacralization that makes it absolute and always emerges from forms of divinization or it is

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<sup>68</sup> Cf. Pizarro, "'Ecosofía': hacia una Comprensión de la Sabiduría de la Tierra desde la Noción de 'Ritmo del Ser' de Raimon Pannikar," 263–78.

<sup>69</sup> This does not imply that interfaith dialogue does not work as a deradicalization and peacebuilding tool (see Byron, "Interfaith Dialogue to De-Radicalize Radicalization: Storytelling as Peacebuilding in Indonesia," 92–102).

<sup>70</sup> Pasqualotto, ed., *Per una Filosofia Interculturale*, 50. The translation is mine. Nishida's philosophy was actually a dialogue between the western philosophical tradition and the Zen culture and practices of Japan, yet Nishida was not just a questioning subject since he was moved by his bodily experience of *zazen* and calligraphy and by the need for a way to express philosophically the insights of Zen—see Vendruscolo, "L'Esperienza del Corpo in Nishida Kitarō." The dialogue somehow transformed at the same time Nishida, philosophy, and Zen culture. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that Nishida wrote a book titled *I and You*, even if his account of the role of the You in the self-contradictory definition of the I differs sensibly from Buber's dialogical approach—cf. Heisig, *Philosophers of Nothingness: An Essay on the Kyoto School*, esp. 79–86.

<sup>71</sup> Pasqualotto himself refers to Jullien as a second example of comparison based on intercultural philosophy (cf. Pasqualotto, *Per una Filosofia*, 50–51).

abandoned to standardizing and sterilizing assimilation that leaves the world identical and inert.<sup>72</sup>

Indeed, Jullien—as much as Panikkar—takes linguistic and cultural diversity as the very life of cultures: “Babel is not a malediction, it is the fortune of thought.”<sup>73</sup> Semantic gaps are what is always there as a tool to avoid conceptual violence and warrants the separation thought by Lévinas in terms of “a relation in which the terms absolve themselves from the relation, remain absolute within the relation.”<sup>74</sup> Here comes the third step, i.e. going back to ecosophy. As much as biodiversity, cultural and religious diversities are the ecosophical traces of the trinity of Reality. Eventually, an open question is to what extent this approach to dialogue can take place in our conflictual world. It is clear from this paper that the most powerful institutions have the lion’s share of responsibility. We might not be able to do much to remind them about their responsibility, but this means that one has at least to write it down. On the other hand, Pasqualotto tells us what we can do for those who have less responsibility: “an intercultural project endowed with realistic awareness... can positively present itself only as a *preventive therapy* for the individual and social catastrophes brought about by economic globalization and as a *rehabilitative therapy* for the victims already suffering from the effects of such catastrophes.”<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Jullien, *Contro la Comparazione: lo “Scarto” e il “Tra”*, 723. The translation is mine.

<sup>73</sup> Jullien, *Contro la Comparazione*, 49.

<sup>74</sup> Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity. An Essay on Exteriority*, 64.

<sup>75</sup> Pasqualotto, *Per una Filosofia*, 29.

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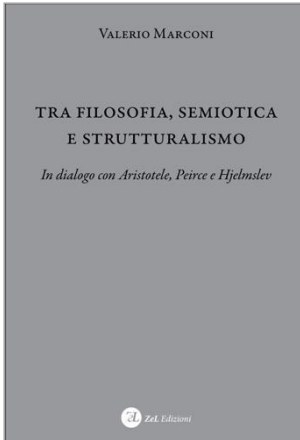
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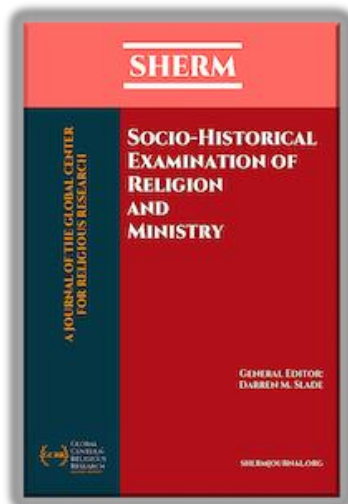
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