

Article

The Apocalypse as a Cosmotheandric Communion: A Hindu-Christian Dialogue

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Abstract: Theologians have been engaged in the reflections of the eschatological in the social and moral conditions of the world for some years now, but the emphasis on the indisputable need for an interfaith dialogue at such a moment is evidently absent. Arguably, the apocalyptic times of pandemic, induced communal hatred, bilateral hostility, and racial discriminations, on a global level, which are also accompanied with many instances by increased charitable behavior and a heightened sense of human responsibility. This paper focuses on apocalyptic theologies in the context of Hindu and Christian settings in India and how they interact, creating the possibility for an interfaith dialogue. Based on Raimon Panikkar's neologism 'cosmotheandric vision,' the paper establishes a relation between intercultural theologies and interfaith dialogue. The apocalypse can be studied as being a constant reminder of the cosmotheandric nature of the universe, for Hindus and Christians alike, fostering a dialogue between the two religions, entirely cognizant of their hermeneutical differences. The moment of apocalypse can be analyzed as a point of cosmotheandric union and absolute togetherness, wherein cultural and religious differences disappear with the consciousness of the whole, the One.

Keywords: Raimon Panikkar; pandemic; apocalypse; interculturality; religion; interfaith dialogue; cosmotheandric



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1. Introduction: COVID-19 and Its Apocalyptic Overtones

Pandemics have a history of being related to apocalyptic narratives throughout the world. The Black Death, an uncontrollable spreading of Bubonic Plague from far Asia to Europe in the fourteenth century, saw many comparisons with apocalyptic notions in Christianity. Simon Dein, in his article "COVID-19 and the Apocalypse: Religious and Secular Perspectives," quotes R. Lerner and F. Dwyer as he writes, "While bad air, divine punishment and witchcraft were postulated causes, for many the Black Death signaled the end-times" (Dein 2021, p. 6). He further mentions the connections that were drawn between the 1918 Spanish flu epidemic and the "ideas of sin and of eschatological sign of Christ's second coming" (Dein 2021, p. 6). Many other pandemics in previous times have also been interpreted as apocalyptic in nature. However, the uncertainty of life, petrifying fear of death, and innumerable speculations about the end of the world that people have seen developing during COVID-19, are incomparable. The COVID-19 pandemic was declared by China on 31 December 2019. It has been two-and-a-half years, the virus has developed many variants, and has led to a disastrous rise in infected cases and deaths. While vaccinations have provided some immunity against the respiratory syndrome, a definite end to COVID-19 has not yet been affirmed. These conditions have led the world population to ponder religious narratives of the end times.

Jerry L. Walls mentions in the introduction of *The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology*, that "The desire to know the future is only natural and takes on even more urgency in times of uncertainty, disaster, and calamity" (Walls 2009). This appropriately explains the urge of scholars to interpret apocalyptic theology in order to uncover and solve the deeper

questions. Jason S. Sexton in his article “The Critical Study of Religion and Division in the Age of Covid-19” also talks about the significance of religious scholarship maintaining its “relevance in the contemporary world” in times of tragedy (Sexton 2021, p. 170). The critical engagement of scholars of religion is essential at the present moment to logically interpret the religious narratives dealing with pestilence and death, and to counter misinterpretation.

The word apocalypse has its origin in “two Greek words, *apo*, which means ‘from,’ and *kalypsis*, which means ‘covering.’ Thus, an apocalypse is an uncovering, or a revelation of what could not otherwise be known” (Walls 2009). Paul O’Callaghan also affirms in his article that “The term *apokalypsis* (usually translated as ‘revelation’) has undeniably eschatological connotations” (O’Callaghan 2021). The global crisis that has recently struck the world has initiated many novel discussions on the apocalyptic overtones of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Not only has the pandemic brought forth the idea of apocalypse as the end of all that exists, it has also stirred conversation on the revelatory aspect of the apocalypse. The article “COVID-19: A Critical Ontology of the present” mentions that “it is the haunting image of the end (apocalypse) which informs people’s ability to find a new thread (a new beginning) at the end of the line. However, apocalypse needs to be understood here not in the widespread understanding of the word as the end of the world as we know it, but more pertinently along the lines of its Greek etymological sense *apokalyptein*; as ‘uncovering, disclosure, and revelation’. On this interpretation, the current pandemic is the occasion to embrace a hermeneutic of suspicion and move beyond, behind, and beneath the surface of the event at hand” (El Maarouf et al. 2021, p. 73). Thus, the apocalyptic imaginary of the COVID-19 pandemic requires us to think beyond the visible end, as an unveiling of a new start. In this article, the purpose of arguing for the apocalyptic nature of the COVID-19 situation is not to reiterate the cataclysmic event but to reveal the possibilities of interpreting the impending apocalypse as a way of bringing humanity together, to unite people. This article interprets the pandemic of COVID-19 as an apocalyptic event aimed at revealing the cosmotheandric nature of reality. Keeping in mind the brevity of this research article, the focus remains on apocalyptic theologies as understood by Hindus and Christians in the context of India.

2. Apocalyptic Theologies in Hinduism and Christianity

The advent of COVID-19 and its horrific growing presence throughout the world has resulted in blatant parallelism between the present crisis of death and destruction and the end times. Be it Hinduism or Christianity, comparisons with religious counterparts have been evident. As discussed above, people do tend to turn to religion in times of uncertainty and difficulty to find answers to their trials and tribulations as “When one is unable to master, intervene and control the situation, religion offers a series of solutions” (Anthony et al. 2021, p. 554). The COVID-19 pandemic made people revisit apocalyptic theologies within their religious and cultural communities, correlating eschatological imageries as mentioned in religious narratives, with real-life scenarios. Prof. Emeritus Dr. Kuncheria Pathil has described how “Theologizing takes place when believers search for answers in the midst of their struggles and agonies where they feel the pinch of their faith and the cost of discipleship in Christ” (Pathil 2012, p. 682). He further notes that “Every authentic theologizing is contextual, experiential and existential anywhere and anytime. Context is a constitutive element of theologizing” (Pathil 2012, p. 682). Culture affects the process of theologizing, and it has certainly influenced the comprehension of the apocalyptic theologies in the COVID-19 outbreak.

The question of existence and non-existence has been one of the major philosophical enquiries of Indian schools of philosophy. While there is no canon of apocalyptic literature in Hinduism, multiple narratives are scattered throughout Hindu texts. The apocalyptic notion in Hinduism is entirely associated with the continual creation and dissolution of the world. On the one hand, the creation hymns in the Vedas (*Nasadiya Sukta* and *Purusha Sukta*) attribute the primordial creation to an unknown entity, self-manifesting from darkness; on

the other hand, creation is believed to have developed from the sacrifice of the primordial being, *Purusha*. The later Hindu texts like the *Manusmriti* and the *Bhagavad Gita* speak of Brahma, one among the trinity¹, as the creator of the universe. Due to the cyclical nature of time in Hinduism, the religion does not have one beginning and one end, but many creations and many destructions. Anindita Niyogi Balslev writes,

In any case, the idea of repeated creation and dissolution is so widespread that it may be taken as characteristic of the Hindu conceptual world. The epic *Mahābhārata*, the *Bhagavad Gītā*, the *Purānas*—all accept this view. In the grand cosmological model that emerges, each world cycle is measured in astronomical figures; a world cycle (*kalpa*) is said to be 4320 million years. Huge time scales are used, and each world cycle is divided and subdivided into periods called *manvantara*, *mahāyuga*, and so on. The *Bhagavad Gītā* describes each world cycle metaphorically as a “day” of Brahmā, symbolizing cosmic activity, followed by the state of *pralaya* (dissolution) as his night, the state of cosmic rest. (Balslev 1990, p. 50)

One *kalpa* (aeon) or day of Brahmā is divided into thousand cycles of four *yugas* that are *Satya*, *Treta*, *Dvapara*, and *Kali Yuga*. The present age is considered to be *Kali Yuga* which began when Lord Krishna ascended to heaven after the Kurukshetra war. As mentioned in *Manusmriti* “In the Krta Age, the Law is whole, possessing all four feet; and so is truth. People never acquire any property through unlawful means. By acquiring such property, however, the Law is stripped of one foot in each of the subsequent Ages; through theft, falsehood, and fraud, the Law disappears a foot at a time” (Olivelle 2004, p. 18). There is an evident decline in the moral values and ethics with each successive age and an increase in evil acts, incurable diseases leading to a progressive shortening of time spans. Therefore, the pandemic in India escalated the use of the phrase “It is *Kali Yuga*” as similar incidents were seen happening with each passing day. The prophecy, as mentioned in the *Mahabharata* and *Kalki Purana*, highlights the coming of the tenth *avatara* of Lord Vishnu, *Kalki*, towards the end of *Kali Yuga*. Interestingly, while some people have imagined COVID-19 as the tenth *avatara* “meant to save humanity from itself and take us into a new epoch” (Sundar 2020), many have understood it as a signal of *Kali Yuga*.

The apocalyptic theology in Hinduism has also developed enormously with relation to the theory of *karma* as mentioned in the *Bhagavad Gita*. The notion of *karma* guides the daily lives of people in India and has even caused the belief that the pandemic is a culmination of collective bad *karma*. Shanthi Van Zeebroeck has argued that COVID-19 is a result of “karmic repercussions” (Van Zeebroeck 2021, p. 7). The author explains how *karma* does not simply refer to action but also to the result of the action; and these reactions are carried forward in the cycle of *samsara* or rebirths. Hrodrigues elaborates, “The idea of *karma* suggests that a transcendent substance is generated and follows the soul based on one’s thoughts and actions. The Upanishads describe *karma* as being accumulated and even transferred from one life to the next; this cosmic “trail” influences one’s subsequent lifetime and form” (Hrodrigues 2015). This notion has been widely seen in light of the pandemic and its apocalyptic overtones by the Indian cultural community.

In addition to this, the term apocalypse is also juxtaposed to the notion of *Maha Pralaya* in Hinduism, as can be found in *Shatapatha Brahmana*. The *Maha Pralaya* is the moment when a flood sweeps away everything that exists. It is the end of the *Yuga Cycle* which is followed by a deep sleep or inactivity. According to the *Bhagavad Gita*, at this moment, the manifest merges back into the unmanifest, the supreme reality, *Brahman* (Johnson 2008, p. 38). This journey of the *atman* to the *Brahman* at the end of time reflects the nature of Oneness of all that exists and the common principle of the divine. This is also referred in the Upanishadic dictum of “*tat tvam asi*” (Radhakrishnan 1953, p. 458). which is translated as ‘that art thou.’ The *Maha Pralaya* leads to the dissolution of everything at once, but this article does not signify the complete destruction of the world through its usage of the term apocalypse. This article draws on the apocalyptic nature of the COVID-19 outbreak in terms of not just the unimaginable disease and death, but also its revelatory character.

Moving on, unlike Hinduism, Christianity has a canon of apocalyptic literature that includes several apocalyptic works. This article has extracted its biblical resources from Matthew 24 and Book of Revelation. The pandemic was comprehended by many Churches as the beginning of the apocalypse, the divine revelation. The Gospel of Matthew states, “For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places: all this is but the beginning of the birth pangs” (Matthew 24:7–8). He adds that even though there will come many false prophets, “But the one who endures to the end will be saved” (Matthew 24:13). Furthermore, the coming of the Son of Man is mentioned, “But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father” (Matthew 24:36). Hence Jesus advises all to stay vigilant and be ready for the coming of their Lord. Hence, pandemics and pestilences are indicated before there is a second coming of Christ.

The last book of New Testament Bible, Book of Revelation is considered one of the primary revelatory texts. It must be considered that “many have taken the text as a literal description of the times while others have used it as a revelation of divine will” (Dein et al. 2020, p. 2). The symbolism presented in Revelation indicates conditions during the end times. Revelation 6:8 refers to the fourth horseman of the apocalypse as the harbinger of death and disease: “And I saw, and behold, a pale horse, and its rider’s name was Death, and Hades followed him; and they were given power over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword and with famine and with pestilence and by wild beasts of the earth” (Revelation 6:8). The succession of orderly disasters is unleashed with the seven seals, seven trumpets, seven bowls and two beasts, before the final judgement takes place “And the dead were judged according to their works, as recorded in the books” (Revelation 20:12). The Apocalyptic Prophecy ends with the creation of new heaven and a new earth after the first things had passed away. John writes, “And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new”” (Revelation 21:5). It is the present situation of COVID-19 that has made some Christians believe that the pandemic is the plague mentioned in Revelation and the second coming of Christ is inevitable (Dein et al. 2020, p. 2).

If we juxtapose the Hindu and Christian apocalyptic theologies with the present scenario of a virus-stricken world, the imminent end of the world seems plausible if not immediate. However, this apocalypse is “a sign from God redirecting humanity on the right path before the ultimate clash between the forces of good and evil” (Dein 2021) as remarked by the Evangelist pastor, Gerald Flurry. The right path can be interpreted as one filled with faith, love, and solidarity, especially indispensable in the catastrophic times, as discussed in the succeeding sections. This interaction between the apocalyptic theologies of two entirely different religious communities, in the context of the pandemic, puts them within the same space where both yearn for solidarity, hope, and communion. The pandemic is an apocalypse, a divine revelation signaling towards a new beginning, a coming together of humanity, of Hindus and Christians. This communion is only possible through dialogue of Hindus and Christians. Let us delve deeper into why an interfaith dialogue is necessary in India when the pandemic seems to evoke an apocalypse.

3. Why Do We Need an Interfaith Dialogue?

In India, the spread of COVID-19 must be viewed in association with communal hatred, racial discriminations, and multitude of other conflicts. The pandemic carried with itself a wave of othering and blame targeting the minorities across India as well as globally. Although fake news has a major role to play in this escalated tension, the aggression, disrespect, and violence did much harm to the already infected population of India. Rageshri Dhairyawan, in her review of Rachel Clarke’s book *Breathtaking: Inside the NHS in a Time of Pandemic*, writes about the COVID-19 pandemic that “for Clarke, it has exposed deep-seated social inequalities, our hubris in the belief we can control nature, and shown us what is essential and what is superfluous” (Dhairyawan 2021). The pandemic brought forth the prejudices held by people in multiple ways. Christopher Summers has highlighted the condition of Indian Christians living in rural areas who were not provided

equal amounts of aid during the pandemic. Out of the people they reached out to, “between 80–90 percent of these believers experienced discrimination in government aid or were denied aid completely” (Summers 2021). Moreover, Tablighi Jamaat, a global evangelical Muslim organization, conducted a religious congregation in March 2020, before the nationwide lockdown. The congregation was soon accused of causing a spike in COVID-19 cases all around India as it did not follow protective norms. The Nizamuddin Markaz headquarters in Delhi was sealed with the attendees still inside, and they were tested multiple times, as reported by Al Jazeera. The panic and the fear created due to this led to an uncontrollable othering, particularly islamophobia. Muslims were othered by majority population as they were viewed as potential virus carriers. People stopped buying goods from shops owned by Muslims and started to maintain an uncomfortable distance. These two incidents should suffice to support my argument on why an interfaith dialogue is needed in India.

COVID-19 has not just attacked human bodies, but also attacked and aggravated the smoldering social evils. Racism, casteism, and gender discrimination are lived realities that were already hard to tackle in a normal daily-life routine. Dealing with such discriminations while trying to stay alive in the middle of a pandemic is not an expected or ideal scenario for anyone. An epidemic or a pandemic calls for an enhanced sense of unity and harmony. It needs solidarity and not othering. Interfaith dialogue offers such connectedness and encourages the values of duty and positive actions in people. In addition to this, the cultural diversity of India also calls for dialogue. The religious and cultural complexity of India needs human communication to eliminate conflict and generate mutual respect. This will be discussed further in the next section.

Interestingly, an interfaith dialogue is indeed possible in India, as was witnessed during the hardships incurred by the pandemic. Dialogue as a form of solidarity and humanity was visible in many parts of India. Acts of kindness ranged from delivering home-cooked food and medicines to the quarantined to arranging oxygen cylinders for those in need. These empathetic acts of people provide hope for the possibility of interfaith dialogue, which could be used for unifying the Indian population. Faith-based communities all around India stepped forward and carried out relief work irrespective of any social denomination. Rev. Joshua Peter, executive secretary of the United Evangelical Lutheran Churches in India, explained in one of his interviews how all the member churches “have been approached individually to make necessary arrangements in their hospitals to face any critical situation that may arise” (The Lutheran World Federation 2020) and have also helped in providing space in their educational institutions to set up isolation wards. There have certainly been many challenges arising from preconceived prejudices and deeply ingrained stereotypes, but this has not affected the implementation of relief activities. As Mujtaba Askari, the founder of Helping Hand Foundation, remarks, “the antidote to hate can never be hate. It is love and compassion” (Thange 2020).

Moving on, the theological understanding of the end times in different religions can lead to a situation of panic and fear, resulting in a variety of religious and non-religious sentiments. An interfaith dialogue is pertinent to remind one that “In the face of situations that present risk of extreme thinking and behavior, religious leaders can instill sensibility and hope in their constituents with sound theological and spiritual explanations to make sense of the events in order to maintain spiritual and emotional balance” (Le Duc 2021, p. 2). Although the above discussion presents an argument that an interfaith dialogue is essential and possible in the apocalyptic situation of the present times, let us interpret how this can be undertaken given the interculturality in India.

4. Interculturality and Interfaith Dialogue

It is necessary to acknowledge the cultural diversity of India when we talk about an interfaith dialogue in the Indian setting. To understand how an interfaith dialogue could take place between the Hindus and Christians residing in India, it is indispensable to talk about interculturality and intercultural theology. How do Hindu and Christian apocalyptic

theologies interact in the cultural context that they are placed in India? How can these intercultural theologies facilitate a dialogue?

Before I begin my argument, we must deliberate over the terms culture, interculturality, and intercultural theology. While Volker Küster highlights the abundant definitions that culture has acquired with time (Küster 2005, p. 418), Thor-André Skrefsrud mentions the prevalent understanding, that “culture refers to a group of people who live together within the same territory and within the same national borders. Culture defines people as a national unit, distinguishing them from other groups of people” (Skrefsrud 2018, p. 46). Interculturality is explained by Raimon Panikkar as taking place naturally and involuntarily. He writes, “interculturality is inherent to the human being and that a unique culture is as incomprehensible and impossible as a single universal language and as one man alone. All cultures are the result of continuous mutual fecundation” (Panikkar 2011, p. 30). Cultures cannot exist in isolation. Assimilation and acculturation are inevitable. Hence, interculturality refers to the communication and relationship among different cultures where they respect each other’s cultural diversities, even when they do not agree with them. The term intercultural theology can be understood following the above definition of interculturality. However, it has also been referred to in various other ways. David Cheetham interprets intercultural theology as a “way of thinking” (Cheetham 2017, p. 143) and William Sweet argues that it is an approach for “deeper understanding of other theologies, perspectives, and discourses” (Sweet 2022, p. 92). Sweet’s article is formed on Pope Francis’ phrase “We need bridges, not walls!” to highlight the need of human communication and dialogue. He further argues that intercultural theology “seeks to remind theologians about bringing to consciousness, and reflecting on, one’s own context and situatedness and “place”” and “calls on theologians to create such a space” (Sweet 2022, p. 84) where dialogue and theologizing could occur. This space has been mentioned by the postcolonial critic Homi Bhabha as the “third space” between cultures, by Volker Küster as the “in-between” space (Küster 2005, p. 417), and by Panikkar as “*terra nullius*” (no man’s land) (Panikkar 2011, p. 10). This space acts as the contact point of all cultures, and makes interfaith dialogue possible. This will be argued for further later. At present, we must return to intercultural theology.

Intercultural theology is primarily a term which developed in relation to Christianity and the crisis of mission after the emergence of the third world. The term came into use only after the 1970s and became popular with the book “Studies in the Intercultural History of Christianity” by Walter Hollenweger, Hans Jochen Margull, and Richard Friedli. Volker Küster’s definition of intercultural theology is helpful here to understand its Christian roots. He writes, “Inter-cultural theology explores the inter-confessional, inter-cultural and inter-religious dimensions of the Christian faith” (Küster 2005, p. 429) Regardless, this theological approach has been used by many theologies to undertake studies on culture, religion, and philosophy. Some of the major scholars of intercultural theology include Raimon Panikkar, Michael Amaladoss, Ram Adhar Mall, Frans Wijzen, Judith Gruber, and Walter Hollenweger. Panikkar has written extensively about interculturality beyond Christianity and intercultural theology and its role in the meeting of different religions. In this article, I draw on Panikkar’s writings to interpret the close relationship between interculturality, intercultural theology, and interfaith dialogue.

It is inescapable to consider here the wide plethora of meanings that the term “intercultural” carries. As Henning Wrogemann highlights, “Intercultural theology is not only about ‘culture’; rather, this term also covers other categories such as context (economic, social, societal, ecological, religious, etc.) and locality. Such a technical term has to be succinct; it cannot represent all these aspects in and of itself. However, it must be clear to those who use the term that ‘intercultural’ does not only refer to ‘culture’ in the narrow sense” (Wrogemann 2021, p. 1). A similar argument was proposed by Panikkar much earlier in 2011, when he said “Interculturality represents the relativity (not the relativism) of everything human, and therefore of these three notions” (Panikkar 2011, p. 9), meaning, religion, philosophy, and culture. Hence, culture is an amalgamation of what exists and

defines a set of people belonging to a specific space. Culture is contextual. In case of India, there is the wider concept of Indian culture and the delineated cultures of different religion and those of various divisions of any specific religion. These cultures are informed by time and space.

Volker Küster argues that “Culture and religion are mutually related and penetrate each other. Thus religions maintain different forms in different cultures. A culture can be multi-religious and a religion can be multi-cultural” (Küster 2005, p. 419). This interdependent relationship between culture and religion supports our argument on how intercultural theologies facilitate interfaith dialogue. In case of India, the cultural versatility evident within religions as well as the different religious population of “Indian culture” points toward the need of dialogue. There cannot be a dialogue without a deep understanding and respect among the multifarious cultural theologies. India as a culturally pluralistic society needs to acknowledge that “Each culture is a world” (Panikkar 2011, p. 14) and every culture “has its own centre, elusive, mobile and contingent as it may and should be” (Panikkar 2002, p. 8). This means that the various cultures cannot be understood as a singular entity and acknowledging their epistemological and hermeneutical differences is imperative for any potential contact among them.

One cannot ignore the centrality of language when we speak of culture and its indisputable function in carrying out any dialogue between religions. India’s plurality of cultures also indicates the plenitude of languages across the country. While there are twenty-two languages in India that are accorded official status according to the Eighth Schedule to the Constitution of India, hundreds of languages and dialects are spoken around the country. Hence, interculturality in India is contingent on the continuous interaction between languages of different cultures and religions. However, that does not mean that this interaction is free from any troubles. Panikkar states that,

Interculturality is problematic. The very moment that I open my mouth to speak, I am obliged to use a concrete language, and thus I am completely in a particular culture; I am on a land which already belongs to someone. I am in my culture, cultivating my land, speaking my language. And if I must, moreover, be understood by my readers, I must necessarily enter a land which is common to all. (Panikkar 2011, p. 10)

Here, Panikkar is pointing towards the link between language and culture and how the situatedness of individuals complicates the process of interculturality and therefore dialogue, which needs a no man’s land. This leads us to ponder whether language affects interfaith dialogue. One cannot deny that communication is not effective unless it results in comprehension, which is dependent upon the language used for communication. Whether the language used is perceived by all the members engaging in a conversation is essential for a dialogue to happen. Until the members comprehend what is being said, it is difficult for them to reach a level of mutual respect and transformation. This understanding is not only limited to a literary analysis but is inclusive of the hermeneutical differences that exist between the terminations used by various religions for a similar religious concept or tradition. Nonetheless, I argue that language is just a medium and true dialogue transcends language. Dana Graef writes in her article *Learning the Language of Interfaith Dialogue*,

Two people look at the same tree, one calls it un roble and the other calls it an oak. There are as many different perceptions of reality as there are leaves on a tree—but the branches are covered in leaves, no matter what you call them. Just as language offers us a way of expressing our experiences, religion shapes the experiences themselves. Different languages clearly have different vocabularies, but they express the same thing. (Graef 2005, p. 106)

Language is not an impediment to true dialogue as the latter is a divine exercise which seeks a cosmotheandric understanding of everything. Interfaith dialogue does not require explanation but demands experience. Until one journeys beyond one’s own periphery into the land of another religion, culture, and language, dialogue does not occur. Panikkar

also travelled to Varanasi and lived among Hindus before even contemplating a Hindu-Christian dialogue. I argue that language helps describe different religious concepts across communities, but it does not directly affect divine experience and realization. Mutual respect does not depend upon one's comprehension of a language; it rather develops from a deep sense of shared humanity, informed by the presence of divine. Let us return to the relation between interculturality and interfaith dialogue.

Panikkar says, "In our times, the crisis of religion cannot be overcome from one single religion, and certainly not from one single culture. *The task is today urgently cross-cultural, i.e., interreligious*, because of the inextricable link between culture and religion" (Panikkar 2002, p. 5) and for this "We must seek a middle way between the colonial mentality which believes that we can express the totality of the human experience through the notions of a single culture, and the opposite extreme which thinks that there is no communication possible between diverse cultures, and which should then condemn themselves to a cultural apartheid in order to preserve their identity" (Panikkar 2011, p. 14). While different cultures understand reality differently, these intercultural theologies make space for conversation. As Panikkar states, "cultures are mutually incompatible but in no way . . . are they incommunicable" (Panikkar 2011, p. 30). The presence of multiple cultural communities does not eliminate but in fact multiplies the plausibility and need for dialogue as "interculturality is the locus of dialogue" (Panikkar 2011, p. 40), and this is what brings us to the plausible Hindu-Christian dialogue in these apocalyptic times.

5. Panikkar's Cosmotheandricism and Hindu-Christian Dialogue

The no man's land required for facilitating an interfaith dialogue between Hindus and Christians can be achieved through a comprehensive understanding of Panikkar's cosmotheandric vision. I propose that Raimon Panikkar's cosmotheandric vision of reality is an adequate way to conduct a Hindu-Christian dialogue. Panikkar's life and his interreligious and intercultural existence is apparent when he says, "I left Europe (for India) as a Christian, I discovered I was a Hindu and returned as a Buddhist, without ever having ceased to be a Christian." This has helped formulate his multireligious experiences and thoughts on interreligious dialogue. Panikkar believed in the meeting of people for any dialogue to take place and his proposal of a "cosmotheandric vision of reality" has been rightly addressed by Scott Eastham as "the mature fruit of all his multireligious experiences" (Panikkar 1998, p. viii).

What makes cosmotheandricism elemental for a Hindu-Christian dialogue during these apocalyptic times is the fact that it is not inherently associated with any religion. Panikkar's book *The Cosmotheandric Experience*, which explains his vision in detail, "unlike many of Panikkar's earlier books, is not a Christian or an India or a Buddhist study, but an interdisciplinary study" (Panikkar 1998, p. viii). This non-relation of cosmotheandricism to any religious community makes it appropriate for establishing a holistic dialogue.

Panikkar's question is: "Is it possible for our epoch to have a unified vision of reality?" (Panikkar 1998, p. 5) is answered by his explanation of the cosmotheandric principle which governs the entire concept of reality. Panikkar writes,

The cosmotheandric principle could be formulated by saying that the divine, the human and the earthly—however we may prefer to call them—are the three irreducible dimensions which constitute the real, i.e., any reality inasmuch as it is real. It does not deny that the abstracting capacity of our mind can, for particular and limited purposes, consider parts of reality independently; it does not deny the complexity of the real and its many degrees. But this principle reminds us that the parts are parts and that they are not just accidentally juxtaposed, but essentially related to the whole. In other words, the parts are real participations and are to be understood not according to a merely spatial model, as books are part of a library or a carburetor and a differential gear are parts of an automobile, but rather according to an organic unity, as body and soul, or mind and will belong to a human being: they are parts because they are not the whole, but they

are not parts which can be “parted” from the whole without thereby ceasing to exist. (Panikkar 1998, p. 60)

Panikkar’s conception of reality does not intend to universalize religions and cultures. It acknowledges the differences that exist and formulates reality based on the relationality of the three elements that are constituents of all beings—divine, human, and earthly. He interprets the interconnectedness of everything by providing the example of the circle. He writes, “There is no circle without a center and a circumference. The three are not the same and yet not separable. The circumference is not the center, but without the latter the former would not be. The circle, itself invisible, is neither the circumference nor the center, yet it is circumscribed by one and inscribed around the other” (Panikkar 1998, p. 75). This relationship between the circle, center, and circumference can be compared to the divine, human, and earthly elements in that they cannot exist in isolation and are only meaningful when seen in context of the other two. God is considered God only because of the existence of humans and nature. It is interesting to note how most of the divisions are threefold in nature. Panikkar mentions this when he says, “It seems that envisioning all of reality in terms of three worlds is an invariant of human culture, whether this vision is expressed spatially, temporally, cosmologically, or metaphysically” (Panikkar 1998, p. 55). To provide a few examples: Heaven, Earth, Hell; Past, Present, and Future; etc.

The cosmotheandric vision is an integration of reality. A reminder that the three elements have emerged from the one source, the *purusha*—primordial being in Hinduism, as mentioned in the *Rig Veda*. This cosmotheandric “vision of totality” (Panikkar 1998, p. 55) points towards trinitarian/non-dualistic/*advaitic* notion of reality. Everything is related to everything and everyone is related to everyone. The One is the whole of which the Many are the parts, distinct but inter-independent. Cosmotheandricism is the foundation of interfaith dialogue for Panikkar as it reveals the divine relationship and non-dualistic presence of all. It is through this idea of reality as a harmonious whole that a dialogue can be generated between Hindus and Christians during these apocalyptic times.

6. Conclusions: Apocalypse as a Cosmotheandric Communion

As interpreted in the above arguments, the COVID-19 pandemic can be interpreted as an apocalypse, based on the symbolism mentioned in apocalyptic narratives. Let us try to comprehend the pandemic in relation with Raimon Panikkar’s cosmotheandric nature of reality. The article “Models of Cosmotheandric Life-Experience in the Face of Coronavirus Pandemic: Empirical Research in the European Context” discusses the models of cosmotheandric life-experience and argues how different people experienced varying aspects of the cosmotheandric nature of reality during this pandemic. The article points toward connection and relationality in the context of its definition of life-experience as “the intense perception of the relational nature of our life and that of others in the face of the life-threatening disease” (Anthony et al. 2021, p. 551). The three models of cosmotheandric life-experience as explored in the aforesaid article are theocentric religious, cosmocentric spiritual, and anthropocentric secular. These are elaborated as interrelated models wherein

The theocentric religious model included items closely associated with religious experience: religious belief, God’s providence and sustenance, immortality and sense of hope, response of faith, call to conversion, prayer to life, initiatives of religious community, religious coping, life’s meaning in religion and in caring for others, etc. The cosmocentric spiritual model of life-experience was represented by items referring to the presence of mysterious forces, sacred aspects of life, life’s meaning based on knowledge, scientific approach, work, hope, etc. The anthropocentric secular model of life-experience encompassed items on life’s meaning, empathy and care for other’s suffering, and sharing anxiety, fragility and vulnerability; hope, values, ideals and achievements; physical exercises, meditation and yoga, etc. (Anthony et al. 2021, p. 561)

While the article presents its findings after intensive research based on data collection from several respondents belonging to variable age, sex, religious belonging, and literacy

levels, it is imperative to interpret these models in context of India before we argue that the apocalypse at hand can be interpreted as a cosmotheandric communion.

For the theocentric religious model, I would like to highlight the initiatives that were taken up by several religious communities across the country. Many faith-based organizations, guided by WHO India and UNICEF, helped set up quarantine facilities in their premises and instilled hope in people. These included but were not limited to “Catholic Faith, Art of Living, Jamaat-I-Islami Hind, All India Muslim Personal Law Board, Jamate-e-Ulema, All India Ulema Council, ISKCON, Isha Foundation, Rama Krishna Math” (WHO India 2020). In the state of Andhra Pradesh, religious leaders of all communities joined their hands in organizing relief activities during the pandemic. The joint statement declared that during this crisis

all religions must seek ways to promote unity and solidarity so that humanity fights this collective challenge. At the heart of all religions is a spiritual conception of the human being that transcends the material body. This spiritual reality, which is called soul, is the source of divine attributes and virtues that allow human beings to demonstrate altruistic behavior. Religion teaches that all humanity is interconnected and interdependent: it is a family and cells of a single body (Agenzia Fides 2020)

This statement highlights the concept of Oneness and communion as understood by different religious communities of India. Moreover, the statement also sheds light on many characteristics of the theocentric religious model. It encourages a sense of community and draws on religious belief to declare the virtue of care as a religious one. Furthermore, several religious groups across the country also set up smaller-scale initiatives to help those in need, such as the Bilalpur New Youth Welfare Society, which is a group of seven Muslims “arranged the last rites for 210 Hindus and 73 Muslims who died of COVID-19” (Deshpande 2021) after their families refused to perform them out of the fear of infection. The members of the Gurudwara Behala in Kolkata engaged themselves in cooking free meals for those in need (Mint 2021). Several other similar incidents can be discussed in line with the theocentric model of the cosmotheandric life experience.

Moving on to the cosmocentric spiritual model, throughout the pandemic there have been several speculations related to the emergence of COVID-19. The speculations have been connected to the cosmos in both scientific and sacred/divine ways. Scientifically, the novel COVID-19 has been proven to “circulate in an animal habitat and then adapt and evolve to ultimately enter the human population. The source of COVID-19 is believed to be a seafood market in Wuhan, China, which sold both dead and live animals” (Bondell 2020). This relationship between the virus and the animals can be seen as representing the cosmic reality. In addition to this, there has also been research in relation to the spread, evolution, and mutation of the virus with the changing seasons. On the other hand, pandemics or any kind of sickness have been linked with the cultural and religious notions of evil spirits and even to the Christian notion of sin and the Hindu notion of *karma*, as discussed previously in this article. The scientific as well as cultural spiritual belief that if we continue to impose harm on the environment and its constituents, an equivalent reaction cannot be avoided sooner or later. Dr. Meena Mahajan, a spiritual speaker and coach based in India, views the pandemic “as not just a virus but a reminder about the unquantifiable loss humans has caused to the planet. The pandemic can easily be seen as a consequence of ignoring the emergency warnings given by nature. Countries shutting down overnight is a sign of nature being absolute” (News18 2020). A similar cosmic spiritual interpretation of the pandemic is mentioned by Larry Dossey as she imagines Mother Nature thinking “I’m sending a lethal virus to remind you of the unitary nature of your consciousness and its inseparability with the natural world” (Dossey 2020).

Further, the anthropocentric secular model of cosmotheandric life experience during the pandemic has been evident in the dynamics of care and empathy, as witnessed during the times of the apocalyptic pandemic. Situations like the pandemic bring forth the fragile nature of humanity. The article “Models of Cosmotheandric Life-Experience in the Face

of Coronavirus Pandemic: Empirical Research in the European Context” mentions that “a life-threatening disease exposes the human vulnerability, namely, the precarious condition of weakness, dependence, and lack of protection. Vulnerability in a way is the identity of every human being, a fragile synthesis of bodily finitude and infinite desire of the spirit” (Anthony et al. 2021, p. 557). This vulnerability creates the awareness of one’s fragility. Prof. Ramin Jahanbegloo, political philosopher and Executive Director of the Mahatma Gandhi Centre for Nonviolence and Peace Studies at Jindal Global University, has written extensively on the fragile nature of humanity and civilization. He highlights that the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed fragility as “inscribed in the ontological constitution of humanity” where it is “the condition of being vulnerable and defenceless” (Jahanbegloo 2020). The fact that humanity and this civilization can end conveys the fragility that characterizes human existence. He adds, “But the coronavirus has, at the same time, also revived a sense of empathy that was concealed for half a century by utilitarian and materialistic modes of human life around the globe” (Jahanbegloo 2020). It cannot be argued that the race towards a materialistic living has given rise to incomparable selfishness and greed, which was only seen to be proven meaningless during the pandemic. The pandemic brought all of humanity to a point where they discovered their deep interrelationships through values such as empathy. We all found ourselves partaking in each other’s joys and sorrows. Perhaps, as Prof. Jahanbegloo remarks, COVID-19 calls for a “genuine revolution of our everyday values” and a “global fellowship” (Jahanbegloo 2020). This idea is what is also behind my argument on the cosmotheandric communion at the apocalypse. This communion is “what the Czech philosopher Jan Patocka called the ‘solidarity of the shaken’” (Jahanbegloo 2020).

While these models of cosmotheandric life experience are introduced as three separate models, their characteristics overlap in several ways. Through the examples given above, one can deduce the interconnected, interrelated, interdependent nature of them. Pope Francis in *Laudato Si* also “describes the God–cosmos–humanity rapport as ‘interaction’, ‘interrelationship’, ‘interconnection’ and ‘interdependence’.” (Anthony et al. 2021, p. 557). This notion of cosmotheandricism as introduced by Raimon Panikkar is what must guide all the humanity during these apocalyptic times. These are the crucial moments when one must awaken a cosmotheandric understanding.

I argue that the pandemic can be viewed as a divine revelation of Oneness and an urgent cosmotheandric communion. This communion calls for an “open horizon,” in words of Raimon Panikkar, as it “offers a satisfying background for human understanding” (Panikkar 1998, p. 4). This open horizon provides a space for different perspectives to exist, by creating mutual respect among them, making dialogue possible. Panikkar highlights that “We cannot allow any religion, culture or fragment of reality—even if it is labeled a ‘leftover’ by a subsequent civilization, or a broken shard by some higher degree of consciousness—to be forgotten, neglected or thrown away, if we are to achieve that total reconstruction of reality which has today become imperative” (Panikkar 1998, p. 2). The apocalypse is a revelation of the connection and relatedness between different religions and cultures. When considered from the perspective of totality, everything is constituted of the same three elements: divine, human, and earthly. The present times call for an interfaith dialogue viz a viz intercultural theology to understand how the apocalyptic pandemic must be understood as an uncovering of the cosmotheandric communion. Unity at a time of apocalypse is a way to reach Oneness and integrate with the whole, the One. William Sweet remarks that

So far as theology is a response to a call, intercultural theology, too, is an effort to respond to a “call”—a response to the divine and to the divine in others, to encounter, to engage, to show gratitude, and to share. To do this requires, first, as suggested above, vulnerability and humility about one’s certainties, and, second, preparing oneself for, and to be open and ready and willing to, change and be changed. In this, then, it seeks to identify one’s presuppositions, to reflect on

one's assumptions and the context in which one does theology, and, as needed, to question and "take down walls." (Sweet 2022, p. 87)

The apocalyptic pandemic has presented multiple hardships that have brought people together, eventually leading to the sharing of their woes and commodities, but also resulting in an increased understanding of each other. This cosmotheandric communion dissolved presumed prejudices, revealing in turn the desire for a unification, a "wholeness," a journey back to the One, of which we are all a part. The COVID-19 pandemic can be interpreted as a communion of people that helped them look for the divine within each other, amidst the natural elements. This cosmotheandric communion was a reminder that reality constitutes ALL. Arundhati Roy, Indian author and political activist, in her article "The pandemic is a portal," reminds everyone that this pandemic "is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next" (Roy 2020). Therefore, one can either interpret the apocalyptic pandemic as a punishment or as an opportunity to reconcile and come together. This article has developed along the lines of the latter interpretation.

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Notes

¹ Trinity in Hinduism refers to Brahma, Vishnu, and Mahesh (Shiva).

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