

Crossing Borders in the Sky: Reflections on the Vertical Frontiers of Cultures

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One interesting definition for culture is culture is the ground on which we walk.¹⁵² The idea of ground or geography brings immediately the idea of diversity, pluralism and interculturality.

The need to reach out to the other even to recognize our own selves is becoming increasingly clear. Horizontal transcendence, therefore, has a definite role to play in any intercultural encounter.

But for a fruitful encounter, there is a need to recognize more the vertical transcendence. There is something in human being that goes beyond him/her, and yet takes place within him/her. There is something in human cultures that has come from the stars, as it were, revealing constantly the human contingency. As we can never set our foot on sky, we will be slow to assert our certitude and instead be ready to place more confidence in our common search.

The culture of the other may determine horizontal boundaries for us. But the vertical frontier is not determined by the other. However, both the frontiers spring from the same human condition. And yet, it is our inability to touch or cross the vertical frontier that will immediately remind us of our contingency and insufficiency.

Every building that we raise, for example, represents our effort as well as our failure to reach the sky, and ceiling is indeed the symbol of our limit.

The intercultural encounter may end up in a horizontal duel if the vertical function of every culture is either forgotten or

¹⁵² I owe most ideas in this brief article to Raimon Panikkar's Inaugural Address to the II international Congress of Intercultural Philosophy held in Sao Leopoldo (Brazil) in April 1997 and published in the Acts of the Congress, edited by Raúl Fonet-Betancourt, *Unterwegs zur interkulturellen Philosophie* (Frankfurt: IKO-Verlag für Interkulturellen Kommunikation, 1998), 20-42.

neglected. The horizontal frontier will not show another way of exit than the defeat of the other. It is the vertical frontier that provides another way out.

To be sure, the vertical boundaries and horizontal do not partake same kind of limitations. The horizontal frontiers may be built by customs or economic fences out of stone or border wire. But the vertical frontier is encountered more in terms of human recognition of contingency and insufficiency to set foot in the limitless.

All this implies that every dialogue has, wittingly or not, a religious aspect. We find ourselves more united in our common search rather than in our individual findings, and the sky is indeed a symbol of and an invitation for this common search!