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### March 16, 2012: Pannikar's Rhythm of Being

Bruce Ledewitz

*Duquesne University*, ledewitz@duq.edu

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Title: Pannikar's Rhythm of Being

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3/16/2012—On two occasions, I have referred to the Michael McConnell/Noah Feldman debate on November 17, 2011, entitled What's So Special About Religious Freedom? Feldman answered, in essence, nothing. McConnell answered, in essence, everything.

That is a misleading way to put it, however, because the topic of the debate should better have been labeled, What is so distinctive about religious freedom? Feldman's point was absolutely not that we could do without religious freedom—he would deny that with all his powers—but that religious freedom is only one part of a larger whole that might be called “conscience”. No free society can do without freedom of conscience but there is no reason to protect that aspect of conscience we call religious freedom to any greater extent than any other part of that field.

Now you might think the debate pointless since it now becomes merely definitional, but the participants saw it as crucial both pragmatically and symbolically. Pragmatically, there are religious exemptions in law now, notably the ministerial exception recently reaffirmed in *Hosanna-Tabor v EEOC* and the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, which although limited, still applies to actions by the federal government. Feldman believes these, and related State protections for religious practice, should either be repealed (no evidence he prefers that) or expanded to conscience protections. From McConnell's perspective, that would necessarily water the protections down and, in any event, religious liberty is distinctively important to protect.

But to argue that religion is distinctive is to be able to distinguish religion from other related human ways of life. One must have a clear idea of what religion is. Feldman did not argue that all meaning-seeking is religious, which he certainly could have. He did not want to assert that we are all religious. So he offered philosophy—love of wisdom—as a way of life equally deserving of protection as religion. McConnell tried to assert religion's superiority to philosophy and in a memorable and genuinely funny discussion of Antigone, McConnell and Feldman debated whether Antigone's dilemma over the burial of her brother was a religious or a philosophical problem.

I thought all along that a debate of this sort is absurd, since the participants did not and could not define religion. But last night I read a wonderful defense of my feeling, in Raimon Panikkar's *Rhythm of Being*. Here is what he writes, in rather complete refutation of both McConnell and Feldman.

“In almost all tradition there has been something considered to be the highest and most comprehensive human activity by which the human being reaches Freedom, Happiness, Realization, Salvation, Peace, or any other name such as Heaven, *nirvana*, or God. If theology is one of the names of this human activity, philosophy, wisdom, *dharma*, *nijnana*, *budhi*, *tao*, and many others could considered homeomorphic equivalents.

Earlier I referred to the fragmentation of knowledge and present-day cultural schizophrenia. I also said that there is a human need to have an ultimate point of reference, but this point does not need to be a monolithic point. We need a center of harmony where our aspirations find an outlet, a living symbol of our inner peace, a resting place for our thirst for knowledge and our longing for love. Our intellectual and spiritual nature is not appeased by an individualistic solution to this need, nor is it convinced by totalitarian and universalistic ideals. The *via media* I am trying to describe is that human activity which is sometimes called Wisdom and theology.” (207).