

Raimundo Panikkar

University of California

HERMENEUTICS OF COMPARATIVE RELIGION: PARADIGMS AND MODELS¹

This article comprises three parts : (I) an introduction situating some of the problems, (II) a central part concentrating on a specific point, and (III) a conclusion, where, I sum up and restate my views in a different perspective.

I

The Phases in The Meeting of Religions

I will begin by reflecting on the nature of Comparative Religion in the kairological situation of today. The discipline is very recent and yet already almost obsolete. It seems to be one of the characteristics of our epoch that everything which raises great expectations reveals some significant weakness within a very short time. Comparative Religion may be a necessary methodological first step, but it has to be overcome (*aufgehoben*) the moment we put it in operation, for, as I shall argue in the second section, it constitutively reveals its infeasibility. In other words, one begins to doubt the real validity of Comparative Religion as soon as one becomes aware of its operation. Yet Comparative Religion is a useful method to begin discovering certain common structures among religions. It also shows us that, for the most part, the relationship between the different religious traditions of the world has unfolded a kind of common typology.

1. The present article is a revised version of the lecture "Methodological Complementarity between the Comparative Study of Religion and the Intra-religious Dialogue" organized by the Centre for Indian and Inter-religious Studies, Rome, and given at the Pontifical Oriental Institute, on January 12, 1978.

This typology may be summarized in five kairological moments,² which I offer as a general metahistorical sketch. In reality, however, the encounter between religions is much more complex. The five moments are the following :

(1) *Isolation*. One could characterize the first period in the meeting of religions as one of *blessed mutual ignorance*. For various reasons, including historical, geographical and cultural, the Jew, the Christian, the Hindu, and so on, go their respective ways paying little, if any, attention to each other. The 'other' in fact, poses no problem since, quite practically speaking, he does not exist. Consequently, this self-sufficient provincialism in religion is a situation without conflict. The Bantus could afford to ignore Celtic religion.

(2) *Indifference*. However, the state of 'blessed mutual ignorance' lasts only as long as geography or history is a barrier. In the inevitable contact between peoples of different cultures and religions, curiosity concerning the stranger is bound to arise. With this comes fascination and attraction but also fear and suspicion. A reaction of self-defence ensues which is often guided by the exclusive conviction of the superiority of one's own culture or religion over all others. The state of ignorance has moved through a psychological mood of indifference to a situation of *contempt and rivalry*. Nevertheless, the 'other' is still not at this point a religious problem. It seemed obvious to Brahmanism that tribal religiousness was not equal to answering what Brahmanism considered to be the fundamental human questions.

(3) *Condemnation*. However, with the establishment and stabilization of contact between cultures and the consequent growing awareness of the outsider, the stranger, there is an increasing need for self-identity. In the effort to abolish the growing threat of the other, rivalry gives way to dispute and the attempt to convert him to our views by any means judged honest. The manoeuvres and means employed in the establishment and justification of self-identity vary according to the social and religious particularities of each civilization. The movement becomes one of *conquest* and, consequently, *condemnation* of others. Historical Judaism had to condemn Idolatry.

(4) *Co-existence*. The fourth attitude comes about when conquest gives way, as it inevitably does sooner or later, to the realization that

2. I have dealt succinctly with these five moments in the Preface to Jacques Langlais' *Le Bouddha et les Deux Bouddhismes*, Montréal, Fides, 1975.

mutual tolerance and *sincere communication* bring about reciprocal and lasting advantages. Rather than conquer the other by forceful domination, I see that his badness is not entirely his fault, but circumstantial. I now try to bring him into my fold and convert him on theoretical doctrinal grounds, as an existential undertaking. However, from the very moment I admit him into my religious world, comparison sets in. I discover that he is, in his own way, capable of achievements, the means to which I thought I alone possessed. In the very attempt to convince the other of my claim to truth, the awareness arises that I am capable of learning from, and being taught by, the "stranger." Intellectual doubt begins as I realize that my information and interpretation is scanty and biased. I become aware of my own particular context and limitations. Thus communication brings about self-reflection, re-evaluation, and new comparisons. When Christianity encountered Hinduism and was politically victorious, it had to establish a *modus vivendi*.

(5) *Mutual Fecundation*. We cannot live together too long without mutual influences, without being mutually contaminated. We cannot have dealings with one another without, before long, sympathy and love emerging here and there. The *convergence of frontiers* and the *intra-religious dialogue* is the fifth moment in our typology. It requires not only a welcoming and listening attitude but a capacity, or even the possibility, to understand. It means that what the other is and says, strikes a chord in my own mind and heart. The dialogue begins to take place within myself. I begin to see that the problem regarding the other is not whether to accept or refute him, but to discover the impossibility of totally refuting or accepting him. The experience of discovering positive values in the other that I cannot account breaks the generally undeclared total self-sufficiency of my own tradition. Dialogue means, too, the doubt that perhaps the 'other's' views are parts of the truth, vectors of reality, perspectives on what lies both outside of me and in the interior of my own reflection. In short the 'other' becomes complementary to oneself.

II

Comparative Religion Reconsidered

Comparative Religion is neither a study which proceeds by a mere juxtaposition of religions nor an evaluation of one religion from the point of view of another. Comparative Religion is rather an analysis of the self-understanding of different religions, and is ultimately a

cross-cultural problem. For not only is the concept 'Religion' not univocal but the various religions of the world have very different understandings of what is meant by that name. The question inevitably arises as to whether there is such a thing as 'Religion' at all, or whether there are even 'religions.' If they do exist we must ask ourselves what we mean by saying that they do. How do we measure, compare them ?

The *prima facie* meaning of Comparative Philosophy of Religion implies that there is a neutral ground, a metaphilosophy, from which to critically scrutinize different religions. This notion is inherently self-contradictory since such a ground should be human and non-human at the same time. Put in the form of a *sūtra* :

How can there be a No-Man's land in the land of Man ?

The search for this neutral ground evolved as a result of the present day scientific passion for 'objectivity', and many of the conceptions of Comparative Religion arise from a pre-critical philosophical position which assumes that there is an unmistakably recognizable transcendent point of view, call it divine, neutral, objective.

However, having recently discovered the provinciality of our philosophizing in the field of World Religions, we turned to Comparative Philosophy of Religion. But without fundamental changes in our methods, this new discipline can take us no farther than the old approaches. The only strictly comparable entities are quantities, so that we can only properly compare if we succeed in bringing the data of philosophy and/or religion to quantitative parameters. Comparison demands a scale and any scale is quantitative. Comparative Philosophy of Religion as such becomes a 'science' like the Natural Sciences which seek mathematical paradigms capable of expressing the behaviour of natural phenomena. The common scale necessary for comparison can only be found if both sides, the comparer and the compared, share a common ground where they are in agreement about applying a particular criterion as the *comparandum*. But the nature of this common ground presents difficulties. The following aporias mention some of them :

(1) If it is taken for granted, that is, if one single philosophy is assumed to be shared by different traditions, we can undertake quantitative comparison. This is not, properly speaking, Comparative Philosophy of Religion. It is rather a (particular) Philosophy of Religion(s). It is also very tentative since it breaks down as a method

the moment anyone asks for a justification of the premises. We cannot compare if the compared challenges the scale of comparison.

(2) If this common ground is mutually recognized by the philosophies or religions concerned, we can have a philosophical comparison of religions, resting on a position that serves as a point of reference so long as it is not contested. This means that there can be a comparative study of those religions which belong to one philosophical club, as it were. But this becomes Comparative Philosophy only *secundum quid*. It is not really Comparative Philosophy of Religion since the club's position, like any other, is a view of the world and not of world-views. The problem is shifted to discussing the number and nature of the possible common grounds.

(3) If Comparative Philosophy is the formal analysis of common structures, the comparable entities have to be found by reducing the philosophical or religious facts to quantifiable formalities. This may be a useful heuristic device for discovering affinities and common patterns among different religions, since the total nature of a religious *symbol*, for instance, is neither contained nor expressed in the formal *sign* that has been ascribed to it, (for example, the differences between *bhagavan*, *deus*, *hypistos* or *bhakti*, *eros*, *agape*, cannot be rendered by adding some distinctive coefficient to the same basic sign, *viz.*, *ax*, versus *bx* versus *cx* etc), this method cannot be called either Comparative Philosophy of Religion or Religiology. I would instead call it 'Religiography.' It may reveal patterns and paradigms hitherto unknown but obscures the important fact that the religious dimension may be *sui generis* and thus incommensurable with quantitative parameters. In other words, there may exist a *plus* irreducible to any formalization. The originality of religion does not lie in its structure, but in how this structure is filled.

(4) The middle way between the reductionisms of pure quantifications and the atomistic conceptions of mutually uncommunicable human constructs, is an approach which underscores the homogeneity of human nature. But the moment we formulate this unity we have to give concrete intellectual contents to it, and this conceptualization is already far from being universal. We cannot identify 'common human nature' with our concept of it.

For example, in the West, the word used to characterize the *humanum* is 'rationality.' Man is *animal rationale*. However, if this is considered to be the ultimate judge in the field of Comparative

Philosophy, many a philosophical or religious system not subscribing to this view will be excluded from the comparison or reduced to a rational structure which does not represent its own self-understood nature. Moreover, interpretations of 'rationality' may differ fundamentally even in the case of formal agreement, so that Comparative Philosophy finds itself relying on a basis which should itself be the outcome of it, *i.e.*, the philosophical understanding of the nature of rationality from a 'comparativistic' perspective.

(5) One might possibly obviate the difficulty by shifting the problem from systems and traditions to concrete human issues, in which case in Comparative Philosophy one would not compare one tradition with another but would study various fundamental issues, for instance, evil, God, suffering, peace of mind, the destiny of human beings and so on, in the light of, say, the Hindu and the Christian traditions. Although this method can be very fruitful the main problem is proving that there are, in fact, certain philosophical and religious problems which can be considered independently of the tradition in whose light these problems are seen. Even to claim that God is a problem, that peace is a supreme value, amounts to speaking from the vantage point of particular systems. There are no naked texts, no pure facts in philosophy or religion or any human awareness. And even if we granted the reality of *noemata* as pure data in a transcendental consciousness, there could be no *pistemata* independent of the particular beliefs of the adherents. For example the belief in *duḥkham* in traditional Pali cannot be equated with 'suffering' in modern English.

(6) If we move away from grand comparison and approach each philosophy in terms of its internal coherence, we are left without criteria for comparison since the several rules of internal coherence need not be the same. We could only evaluate the different systems internally, which may be a sound classificatory analysis, but is it Comparative Philosophy ?

It may be a truism to say that Comparative Studies is concerned with speaking beings, but the fact is often overlooked that if we are comparing speaking beings we must learn to listen to them. Comparative Studies is basically a question of communication and language. To come to an agreement or disagreement about any common issue, requires a common language. Comparative Philosophy is then reduced to the problem of a common human language.

Thus communication between different religions involves belief in the translatability of different philosophical and religious languages. Translation, however, is not only an individual activity but is dependent on a common frame of reference which the translator finds already existing. Today, due to the intermingling of cultures, this common context has become peculiarly dynamic. For instance, a modern Roman Catholic will find it much easier to use the word 'grace' to express an analogous concept found in some Asian religions than would have been the case a few decades ago. Emerging from syncretism and eclecticism, Comparative Philosophy is an expression of the factual *praxis* of the human situation. And today, a new philosophical *theoria* is emerging from the *praxis* of our pluralistic situation.

However, by its very nature, translation entails the integration of one more or less partial view of the world with another, and this cannot properly be called Comparative Philosophy or Comparative Religion.

The problem outlined in the above aporias may be overcome by recovering the original sense of philosophy as a total human exchange in the Socratic or Upanishadic sense of dialogue, rather than the modern Western (post-Cartesian) conception of philosophy as an isolated and exclusively rational reflection around a 'poêle.' Traditionally, a thinker confronts what he assumes are generally held views with his own convictions. However, in order to make himself understood he must situate his discourse into a context that makes it both comprehensible and convincing. Although this approach, when genuine, always tried to be fair to the 'opponent', it was, by and large, a double monologue, and, in the last analysis, a question of depriving the other, of domination by comparison.

Today, a new factor has emerged. The two disciplines, Comparative Philosophy and Comparative Religion, are born not only out of the old universal desire to understand; they emerge from the insight that it might not be possible to understand foreign cultures and religions without deforming or compromising them. The question arises: can we understand without reducing the phenomenon to our patterns of understanding? This new question is the outcome of the deleterious results of monistic approaches, one God, one Church, one Empire, one Reason, one Science, one Technology and so on.

There is a new need to understand the other in his own terms, even to the extreme that we may only understand that we do not under-

stand. The word is pluralism, *i.e.*, the effort to overcome unconnected plurality without, however, falling into undifferentiated unity. This is not so much the desire for comparison, *i.e.*, self-assertion, as for dialogue. It is not *what* the other says (*aliud*) which counts, but *who* the other is (*alius*); not what I think about the other, which is important, but whether I can grasp what he thinks about himself.

This is *Dialogal Philosophy*. The comparison is not made from the viewpoint of one philosophy or philosopher but is processual, a multi-voiced philosophy in which the different problems are allowed to express themselves according to their own categories, contexts and self-understandings. It is no longer a question of the scientific way of understanding how elements *function* so much as knowing what they *are*.

Since many a philosophy or religion regards itself as ultimate, we cannot justifiably compare that which purports to be unique and uncomparable. For this reason I prefer the neologism, *Imperative Philosophy*, since we can only truly *imparare*, learn by being ready to undergo the different experiences of other peoples, philosophies and religions. This kind of learning is reflective, critical and provisional.

Imperative Philosophy recognizes that we cannot avoid taking a stand somewhere when we philosophize. There is no neutral ground in the human arena. All reflection is, by its very nature, contextual and therefore partial. There is no fulcrum outside time and space from which to objectively view all other views. *Imperative Philosophy* thus : (1) is critically aware of the contingency of its own assumptions and the unavoidable necessity of resting on still unexamined presuppositions³; (2) is constitutively ready to question its basic foundations if they are challenged; (3) is primarily concerned with searching for the primordial ground of philosophizing (understanding); (4) attempts to form its philosophical view of reality by systematically taking into

3. I make a fundamental distinction between 'assumption' and 'presupposition.' Assumptions are conscious axioms which I appropriate as the basis of my thinking, in order to study further. Presuppositions, on the other hand, are unconscious and at the basis of my construction (supposition = *sub-ponere*). They are also sent 'before', so that they allow me to examine where I am standing (pre-supposition). Once I have become aware of a presupposition I can choose to either accept it, in which case it becomes an assumption, or reject it in which case I will have to change my earlier standpoint. Reflection converts presuppositions into assumptions.

account the universal range of Man's experience inasmuch as this is possible in any finite situation; (5) is open to dialogal dialogue with other philosophical and religious views and not only to dialectical confrontation and rational discussion. It must be capable of revealing the truth of respective philosophies not just expressing their formal correctness.

It is this last point which, in its constitutively processual and open nature, marks the passage from *Imparative Philosophy* to *Dialogal Philosophy*. For only in the Dialogue itself can misunderstandings be eliminated and mutual fecundation take place. The Dialogue is thus not only a method but an essential part of the subject-matter.

Philosophy as such implies a new hermeneutics, which I have called *diatopical*, and becomes a collective enterprise, which includes essentially, both spectator and spectacle. There is nothing radically new in trying to become aware of one's own relativity. The novelty lies in the fact that *Dialogal Philosophy* wants to understand the *other* understander *qua* source of self-understanding. Unlike the Natural Sciences which have an objective criterion of measurability *Dialogal Philosophy* as the method in the Comparative Philosophy of Religion can never assume a universally accepted outside *metron* for comparison. It is, in the Master of Alexander's words, "wisdom that constitutively searches itself."

III

Three Models

Another way of articulating and expressing in more concrete terms these difficult problems would be to take root-metaphors. It is here that some models may prove useful. I shall briefly describe three of them.⁴

(1) The Rainbow Model

The different religious traditions of mankind are like the almost infinite number of colours that appear once the simply white light of reality falls on the prism of human experience; it diffracts into innumerable traditions, doctrines and religions, through culture,

4. Part III is a summary of the discussion of the Three Models in the author's Introduction to *The Intra-religious Dialogue*, N.Y., Paulist Press, 1978,

geography and many other factors. Through any particular colour, viz., religion, one can reach the source of the white light. Provided there is not total darkness, any follower of a human tradition can reach his or her fullness, salvation. Just as the mixing of two colours may give rise to another, so the meeting of two religious traditions may give birth to a new one. In fact, most of today's religions are the result of such mutual combinations.

Though the religions merge at the fringes, they form a particular context which colours a view of things. Within the green area all will appear greenish. A similar object within the red area will appear in a red light. This model illustrates the paramount importance of the context in comparing 'religious truths.' The variety of human experiences preclude the possibility of a total view from a single perspective. The metaphor can be extended. Just as the colour of a body is, generally speaking, the only colour that the body does not absorb, so each religion has hidden within itself, all the other colours. The external colour is its appearance, its message to the world but not the totality of its nature. We realize this when we attempt to understand a religion from within. This metaphor does not necessarily imply that all religions are the same. There may be black or colourless spots. A humanistic critique of traditional religions may call the religions of the past obscurantist and deny them the character of bearing light; only the enlightenment traditions of Rationalism, Marxism and Humanism would come under consideration. The metaphor could even be extended to provide an image of one particular religion considering itself as the white beam and all others as refractions of that primordial religiousness. It shows us how the variety of religions belongs to the beauty and richness of the human situation. Only the entire rainbow can provide a complete picture of the true religious dimension of Man. Thus this rules out *a priori* that which is not known, cannot be accepted in a true encounter of religions.

(2) The Geometrical or Topological Model

Here deformation, not defraction, is the cause of the different forms and shapes of religions. Geometrically speaking, topological deformations are the different homeomorphic correspondence of one primordial position. Different sets of symbols express that reality according to the topological situation of any given body. This means that each religion is a dimension of the other although they appear different and even mutually irreconcilable unless a topological invariant

is found. The invariant may be the theory of families of religions, or the hypothesis that all the various human ways come from a fundamental experience transformed according to laws, which have to be discovered. Or again, it might be that all religions are actually different until the topological transformations have been constructed.

Because all religions are dimensions of the one original form and thus dimensions of each other, each major religious tradition contains the whole canon of everything. In this sense every authentic religion embodies the whole truth in its own characteristic way. It can, however, only be accepted by a deep understanding of the homeomorphic correspondences within each system. These homeomorphisms cannot be reduced to another or higher system. There is no call in this understanding and encounter, for anything other than what is contained within the inner structure of the systems themselves. Comparison among religions is thus is not a question of finding analogies nor of continuing the self-defeating search for the perfect 'neutral' ground from which to view all things. Rather, it involves recognizing the *circumincessio*, *perichoresis*, *pratītyasamutpāda* or 'connaturality' between the different religious traditions so that analogous or continuity models become insufficient to express the relation. What is needed is an understanding of religions from within, an uncovering of their concrete structures to find by a deeper intuition, whether this be scientific or mystical, their corresponding equivalences.

An awareness of the difference between homeomorphism and analogy is fundamental to a real understanding of religions. For example, Brahman and God are not merely two analogous names. Brahman could perhaps be described as total, fundamental immanence, while 'God' in the Semitic traditions is transcendent; 'God' is a person, 'Brahman' is not; the one is the creator of contingent beings, the other is the origin of the possibility of being, and so on. An analysis of the attributes of 'God' and 'Brahman' will uncover no analogy. Yet between the two there is a relationship that allows me to think, speak and feel about them similarly, in a way that cannot be so stated of 'Brahman' and 'chair' or 'God' and 'table.' The relationship is homeomorphic in that the symbol of 'God' within one tradition performs an equivalent function to the symbol of 'Brahman' in another.

The function is not analogous: 'God' maintains order from on high; 'Brahman' is the ground and condition of all there is. Rather, there is a relationship which is geometrical and topological and which

is accounted for by the topological model. So religions, which on the surface and at first sight appear very different, may find connections once the topological transformation is found that permits a connection without reducing the uniqueness to sameness or even similarity.

(3) The Linguistic Model

Like any language, each religion is complete in its own way and capable of expressing everything it feels the need to express. When the need to express something new arises, the means to express it is found. New needs emerge since no particular language can exhaust the range of human experience or possibilities. Religion as language must thus be open to growth and evolution and be capable of change and redefinition as the occasion calls. Constituting a word in itself, each language gives and takes from its neighbours, exercising a mutual and reciprocal influence. However, and this is an important point, each language only takes as much as it can assimilate. Before a totally foreign word can be introduced, there must be receptivity and a readiness to accept, or the word cannot even be received. In short, there must already be something within the language capable of accepting, understanding, adapting or refuting the particular word, sentence, or vision of the world which is introduced by the impact of the other. The same, of course, applies to religion. It is in this open and receptive attitude that enrichment can take place. Now the great difficulty in the encounter of languages appears in the two-fold problem of understanding and translation, namely, a common linguisticality. In order to speak another language I must first learn it, that is, I have to be taught. The comparative study of religion thus necessitates first of all the humility of learning, of sitting at the feet of the other. If my language is Buddhism and I want to speak Islam I must enter whole-heartedly into the language, feel within it, incorporate into myself everything which is taught to me. Only then when I have made it my own can I really speak it. Since a language is total in itself, I only really speak it when there is no conflict between what I want to express and what I can express. In other words, the language becomes a perfect means of expressing what I need to say, which amounts to saying that learning another language is not an acquired skill which I superimpose onto my previous situation; rather; I have to grow towards and into the whole context of the other tradition. Only in this way can mutual fecundation and expansion take place between my language, *viz.*, religion, and the new one.

Religions are equivalent to the same extent that languages are translatable. This translatable sphere refers first of all to the common

world of objects which can be empirically verified. For each such object there is an epistemic sign : 'tree', 'atom', 'wine', and so on. These I call 'terms' and because they are all empirically verifiable within certain conditions, they are also translatable, which means that if a language has no particular name for an object, a term can quite easily be invented or adopted. But the most vital part of a language as well as a religion, is its uniqueness, its untranslatability. This is the realm, not of epistemic signs to orientate us in the world of objects, but of symbols which permit us to live in the world of human beings. The uniqueness of language lies in 'words' which, unlike terms, reflect a total human experience. They are not objectifiable because not totally separable from the particular instance in which they are used, and the meaning they are given. Each word is uniquely used and every usage of a single word is equally unique, in that each of us gives different shades of meaning to the same word and one person uses a single word in a variety of ways. Consequently, words like 'justice', 'God', 'Brahman' which have no empirical referent, cannot be understood outside the human experiences crystallized around them, which vary with history, geography, psychology, and so on. They cannot be translated outside these contexts but have rather to be transplanted along with the soil in which they are rooted, the world-view which gives them their meaning. Thus a word can only be heard if it is not severed from its speaker. This 'hearing' is an essential act in transplanting. The word extends its roots into the fertile soil of the listener and there undergoes growth and transformation acquiring new connotations, aspects, expansions of meaning. The translator of a foreign language, an alien tradition, must be a true spokesman for that religion, able to speak it *by heart*, knowing its words not merely its terms. He must have taken the risk of involvement in and commitment to the religion. He must have understood (stood under) it. This is the meaning of an encounter *qua* encounter which does not side-step to 'neutral' ground, nor expects to achieve movement by not moving from the original place. In short, only the person who really speaks the language, that is, who is fulfilled in it, can be a genuine translator.

In sum, the linguistic model helps us in our problem of re-thinking Comparative Religions. Religions as language cannot be compared outside Religion as language, which would not be an artificially posited No-Man's land with no bearing on reality and therefore no constitutive meaning. As I suggested earlier, only when we have a common language can we begin to compare, *i.e.*, to weigh against a common background. Comparative Religion can only be comparative from

the standpoint of the concrete religions themselves. This demands an entirely new method, quite different from the one which arises out of the assumption that there is a non-religious neutral 'rationality' entitled to comparatively scrutinize in the field of religions.

In order to find a common method by which to engage in the encounter of religions today, we must take a long look at the human condition. We must work with the present reality of pluralism, which lies between monolithic unity and unrelated plurality, to discover in the existing polarities, the richness of our real being.