

KAPITTEL 2

To Compare is to Understand Oneself: On the Existential Significance of and Dialectical Dynamics *in* Intracultural Comparison

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Abstract: This article discusses the existential significance of intracultural comparison. Drawing on four authors (Walter Benjamin, Marcel Detienne, Raimon Panikkar and Paul Ricoeur) from various disciplines and areas of research, my aim is to highlight that an *existential approach* to comparison is necessary to appreciate the *relational* and *intracultural* aspect in cross-cultural comparison. Furthermore, I aim to scrutinize how intracultural and intrareligious comparisons are existentially significant: comparison has a potential role in developing human self-understanding at the same time as a human subject is the point of departure for such comparisons. Through the subject's experience of the so-called *incomparable* in another culture or religion and in the creation of a comparable, the subject is both the obstacle to understanding and part of the solution of creating understanding. It is the claim of the author that a shift from a third-person perspective articulates a common idea to all these authors: that cultures, religions, and languages have an *internal relation*. It is a reflection on the dialectics of incomparability and how the "incomparable" in other cultures and worldviews could be both an opportunity for putting ourselves into perspective and for creating connections between worldviews and cultures.

Keywords: intracultural comparison, Detienne, Panikkar, Ricoeur, Benjamin

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Introduction

Comparison has a long tradition as a scientific method for acquiring knowledge in humanities and social sciences (Crowell Collier & MacMillan, 1968; Dumont, 1983; Durkheim, 1951). It has also been familiar to philosophy since the establishment of the transdisciplinary field of intercultural philosophy (Kimmerle, 2002). As with other methods, comparison has its own challenges and problems (Amselle, 1998). One of the fundamental epistemological problems with this method is how to compare “the incomparable” (Detienne, 2009). Does that which cannot be compared represent the limit and the unsurmountable epistemological obstacle to comparison?

In this article, I will relate to this question but not from a purely epistemological angle and not without rephrasing it. As I see it, this problem is not merely epistemological. Furthermore, the comparative practice itself is not just a scientific method that yields knowledge of facts in the world. Comparison is also an existential enterprise: The problem of incomparability risks disrupting the idea of human continuum. It reveals our limited and perhaps ethnocentric perspective. Briefly, both comparison and the failure to compare are connected to our self-understanding. Hence, the text addresses the existential significance of intracultural and/or intrareligious comparison.

To shed some light on this question, I will draw on theoretical discussions and examples from philosophy, comparative anthropology, comparative mythology, and theology. Marcel Detienne (2009), Paul Ricœur (2004), Walter Benjamin (1977), and Raimon Panikkar (2013a, 2013b) are authors who share perspectives and an interest in cross-cultural understanding. Even though not all of them write equally explicitly on the topic of comparison, Panikkar and Ricœur argue that translation and dialogue are themes akin to comparison. And as I will try to show, they all present fruitful and relevant approaches to the existential significance of intercultural and interreligious comparison. Considering this, we can begin to rephrase the initial research question and investigate the existential significance of comparison in intercultural/interreligious studies: *How does comparison represent an existential opportunity both to put oneself into perspective and/or to create relations to other cultures, religions, and worldviews?*

Three existential aspects of comparison

Drawing on these authors, my aim is to discuss the following aspects in relation to this question. These three aspects will constitute the three subsequent stages in this chapter:

- 1) The first step is to discuss a thematic likeness between translation and comparison. Taking Ricœur and Benjamin as a point of departure, I want to highlight the explicit and implicit likenesses between translation and comparison as practices that *create relations and connections* between languages, cultures, and religions. Comparison is, from this perspective, not just about discovering similarities between cultures and religions that eventually reveal a historical kinship. Similarities are like facts in the world that the comparatist can perceive from a third-person perspective. Put differently, comparability between cultures does not depend on a common ancient historical source as is the case, for instance, in studies of Indo-European languages, cultures, and myths (Dosse, 1992). Though this latter kind of comparison might be perfectly valid, comparability here seems to imply some theoretical assumptions: that comparison is made from a third-person perspective (the comparatist as a scientist that gathers data from empirical material); that comparability is possible due to a similarity between empirical data; and that the kinship of languages, cultures and myths is grounded in a common historical root. According to Benjamin, the translator articulates what could be regarded as a *spiritual kinship*. And I might add that comparison articulates an *existential kinship*.
- 2) But, as Detienne asks, what about the incomparable? Is it also possible to compare something that is not immediately similar and make connections between seemingly unsimilar (i.e., incomparable) phenomena? Perhaps not from a third-person perspective, but I think it is from a first-person perspective. As I will try to show, to compare is also to create connections between my (religious [or non-religious] and/or cultural) background and the so-called foreign. In other words, a shift of perspective is needed to grasp this. This leads us to my second point, where I want to look at how the

cultural differences, obstacles and hindrances – in other words; “the incomparable” – do not have to be a negative experience that disrupts understanding across cultures and religions. It is also an opportunity to put myself into perspective and hence acquire a deeper understanding of myself. This renders it necessary to articulate what I would call a “dialectics of incomparability”. This dialectic is between two kinds of incomparability: a) one in the form of something complete opposite that it is impossible to relate to; and b) another where a relation can be created but which requires a change of perspective on my part.

- 3) The third aspect is linked to the previous two in that both continuity (the relational) and discontinuity (the incomparable) can be reconciled through Raimon Panikkar’s notion of *intracultural* comparison. Here, as elsewhere in the article, the point is that a shift from a third-person perspective to a first-person perspective is necessary to comprehend this perspective.

The equivalences and “kinships” between languages, cultures, and religions

I will, in this chapter, draw on Ricœur and Benjamin’s discussion of translation. Even though translation is a different topic to comparison, there are some analogous ways of thinking that might shed some light on comparison.

Paul Ricœur (1913–2005) was a French philosopher with an immense interest in the relation between philosophy and topics “outside” philosophy. In reading Ricœur, one meets a very interdisciplinary oriented mind equipped with sharp philosophical tools. In a collection of texts entitled *On Translation (Sur la traduction)*, Ricœur discusses the philosophy of translation (2004). In one of the texts, he investigates the question of untranslatability. Is it possible to translate when there is no (third) text that can guarantee the correspondence between two texts in two different languages? We see here that translation and comparison share some common problems: The problem is not only how we can render account for the apparent absence of a word or phenomena

in your own/a foreign language, culture or religion that exists in your own/a foreign one. The problem goes even deeper. Even if we do have words or phenomena that seem to be similar, we do not have a neutral third-person perspective that can guarantee us an equal identity between them.

Ricœur concludes that this problem is impossible to solve in theory, only in practice, and that it is by reflecting on the practice of translation we can get closer. This is for some perhaps not a satisfying solution of this *contradictio in adiecto*. And from a theoretical point of view, it is not. Is it then sufficient to just shift the attention to practice? I think my distinction between third and first-person perspectives is a helpful and necessary complement to Ricœur's distinction between theory and practice. Briefly, what the first-person perspective adds is that comparisons and translations are done by subjects. It is subjects that perceive differences as unsurmountable, and it is subjects that might find similarities across these differences. As the Norwegian philosopher Hans Skjervheim put it, we are as subjects "participating" in understanding the world and not just objective "spectators" to it (Skjervheim, 1996). We can be spectators too, of course, but we are participating in the construction of meaning and understanding. So, I think Ricœur is correct in underlining the practical and the creative aspect. Translations and comparisons are the product of a construction or creation. According to him, to translate is to construct or produce an equivalence without identity (*une equivalence sans identité*) (Ricœur, 2004, p. 60). An equivalent (from the Latin adjective *aequivalens*) indicates equal but not identical value. Translation, like comparison, from this perspective thus proposes and creates an exchange; it tries to create a relation by proposing something of equal value or a replacement, but also something which is not identical. If it was identical, then translation would not be necessary. The notion of equivalence, and accordingly translation, is hence historically connected to non-monetary economics where exchanges without an objective standard must be established through the creation of equivalent goods. What is at stake in this kind of exchange, as well as in translation and comparison, is to establish relations that do not have an external, third-person, objective standard to go through. So, what kind of relation are we dealing with?

To develop this further, Ricœur draws on the thoughts of the philosopher Walter Benjamin and his notion of “kinship of language” (*Verwandtschaft der Sprache*). So, we need to know more about Benjamin’s philosophy of translation. Benjamin was a German philosopher who is often linked to the so-called “Frankfurter school” and philosophers such as Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, as well as the author Berthold Brecht. On the other hand, Benjamin also had a strong and to some a mysterious relation to Jewish and messianic thought, especially through Gershom Scholem. In taking up this messianic impulse, Benjamin introduces an innovative take on language that to many initiated a paradigm shift in the philosophy of translation (Buden, 2008; Crépon, 2004).

¹Throughout the text of *The Task of the Translator* (*Die Aufgabe der Übersetzers*), Benjamin is the first to break with the central assumption that translation is the transportation of meaning from the original (source) language to another (reader’s) language. According to him, the aim of translation has little to do with the original. Instead, translation is an activity of creating relations between languages. Or, as he puts it, what the translation does is *to express the internal relation the languages have to each other*. What is this relation (*innerste Verhältnisse*)? The internal relation between languages is their kinship (*die Verwandtschaft der Sprachen*) (Benjamin, 1977, pp. 52–53). But this kinship is not a kinship in the sense understood in comparative philology of “the postulate of a kinship between various languages, issued from a common root, the Indo-European mother language” (Dosse, 1992, p. 52). The kinship that Benjamin articulates transgresses the empirical similarities and differences between languages. What Benjamin has in mind is a pure language, or the unity (*allheit*) of (the intentions in) the languages. This is, as I see it, what Benjamin means by *internal* relation (*innerste Verhältnisse*). The relation that a translator creates between two languages does not go through a third language external to them. As noted above with Ricœur, this is what often is assumed in the theory of translation: For translations to be possible, there must be a third-person perspective, a third text that guarantees an identical equivalent. And this assumption is also the reason

1 The following six paragraphs are based on another article written by the author.

why many others claim that translations are impossible: there is no such text or perspective. But if the relation is *internal* and does not depend on an external point of view, then we can approach this differently.

We see here a similar problem (and “solution”) in the theory and practice of translation and comparison. Whereas the theoretical perspective on comparison and translation entails a third text, a third-person perspective, external to the languages or comparative units, the practical perspective gives us a first-person perspective without a third text and where the relation between the languages and comparative units is internal. As expressed by the Italian philosopher Adriano Fabris apropos Benjamin’s text: to translate is an art through which we create relation (Fabris, 2013, p. 164).² I would like to add here that the brilliance in Benjamin’s thought is to highlight that this relation is an internal relation.

Translation is, furthermore, a question of potentiality and actuality. In his introduction to Benjamin’s work, Sven Kramer (2004) writes that what is expressed in translations exists in the original as a potential and is actualized in the translation. This gives translations a productive dimension in the sense that the kinship or relation between languages is produced or created. So, in this production or creation something is transformed at the same time as this something is articulated. This productive aspect connects him, as far as I can see, back to what Ricœur was saying about translation as the production of an equivalence without identity. Where Benjamin points out that translation is not the transfer of meaning from an original to the reader’s language, Ricœur reflects on the absence of the third text that can guarantee a perfect correspondence between the two languages involved in a translation. Ricœur writes that the cultural kinship (*parenté culturelle*), in the sense of concrete historical contact between cultures, obscures the true nature of the equivalent. An equivalent is rather produced by the translation than assumed by it (*l’équivalence, qui est plutôt produite par la traduction que présumée par elle*) (Ricœur, 2004, p. 63).

2 “Das Übersetzen, in seiner allgemeinen Bedeutung, die ich hier untersuche, ist demnach eine Art, in der wir die Beziehungen schaffen” (Fabris, 2013, p. 164).

I find it interesting to note here that Ricœur addresses the potential misunderstanding of seeing cultural kinship as a condition for translation. In fact, examples of historical and cultural kinship where one language (Scandinavian languages as developed from the Germanic, or Romance languages from Latin), culture or religion (Islam as developed from Judaism and Christianity or Buddhism from Hinduism) could be perceived as a development from the other obscures the nature of translation and accordingly comparisons. These are not cases of the construction of equivalences but rather the historical transposition and transformation of concepts, traditions, phenomena etc. into new traditions. But the radical understanding of translation and comparison that Ricœur is after is rather that the equivalence does not exist prior to the translations. So, in the kinship and relation between languages, in the production of equivalence and comparability, we can see the outline of thinking continuity between languages, cultures and religions. And this continuity is not a historical continuity.

Regarding the question of how comparison represents an existential opportunity for putting oneself into perspective and/or to create relations with other cultures, religions, and worldviews, we have so far looked into the relational aspect. However, as the relation and the equivalences created between languages in translations are an internal relation, this indirectly indicates that an external criterion for comparability cannot be found. Briefly, since comparability (identical equivalency) cannot be guaranteed, incomparability continues to represent a problem for any translator and comparativist. On the other hand, the immediate experience of incomparability in translation or human understanding is also the dialectical engine in finding and producing comparisons. It is a human being that experiences the “incomparability”, who is motivated to articulate the kinship of languages, of finding equivalences and creating relations to other cultures, languages, and religions.

Now, even though we see translation and comparison in the light of each other, I have so far been more occupied with translation. Secondly, the approach is still relatively abstract. And part of the point here is to look at the existential dimension from a first-person perspective. So, we need to concretize it more and go into more depth on the theme of

comparison and look at it from the perspective of the comparatist herself. The link may be found in Ricœur's own text because, to say something on the challenges of translation, Ricœur refers to the mythologist and historian of ancient Greece Marcel Detienne. The latter developed some similar thoughts in the book *Comparer l'incomparable* (2009), which we will soon dive into.

What do we (often) mean by comparison?

Before going into Detienne's approach to comparison, I would like to say a few words on how the notion "comparison" is often perceived.³ If we look at how the term is defined, for example, in the French dictionary *Le Petit Robert* (2000), the verb *comparer* (to compare) in French is defined as "to examine relations of similarity and difference"⁴ (*Examiner les rapports de ressemblance et de différence*). Looking at the German thesaurus *Der grosse Duden. Bedeutungswörterbuch* (1970), we can read that the verb *vergleichen* (to compare) means a "thorough examination, by holding together at the same time or by contrasting, in order to determine differences or accordances"⁵ (*prüfend nebeneinanderhalten oder gegeneinander abwägen, um Unterschiede oder Übereinstimmungen festzustellen*). Simply put, what these lexical definitions of comparison signal is that to compare is to bring together phenomena to evaluate similarities and differences between them. This has some truth in it, as this is an important line in the ethnological and anthropological way of thinking (Amselle, 1998), as well as in cultural analysis. The latter has, according to Jan Assmann, two conditions:

3 This paragraph is partly motivated by the author's own experience of how university students respond to assignments where they are told to compare religions or cultures. A common conclusion is often that specific phenomena and cases are so different that they cannot be compared. In other words, a common understanding of comparison seems to be that it means similar.

4 Translated by the author.

5 Translated by the author.

The first condition is a theory with and apparatus of concepts, distinctions and hypothesis ... The second condition is a manageable corpus of cultures with a sufficient amount of different and common features to be compared in a meaningful way". (Assmann, 2018, p. 265)⁶

Though this is a challenging but valid scientific method, my point is that as long as we understand similarities and differences merely as empirical phenomena, we do not reach the existential dialectics of comparison where the background of the comparing subject is in play. It does not address the problem of the "incomparable". This is, however, not the only comparativist tradition. One alternative is Louis Dumont (1975, 1983), which I will not go into here. Another is Marcel Detienne, who I will turn to now.

The "incomparable" as a dialectical force in comparison

Marcel Detienne (1935–2019) was a French mythologist and expert on ancient Greek history and culture who worked as a professor of religious studies at the *Ecole Pratique des Hautes Études* in Paris and at the John Hopkins University in Baltimore. So, even though we limit ourselves here to a small part of his contribution to comparison, his academic contribution to his field is immense.

What we are going to look at here is the chapter "Compare the incomparable of nations" (*Comparer l'incomparable des nations*) from the aforementioned book *Compare the Incomparable*.⁷ Here, Detienne discusses if it is possible to compare that which cannot be compared. Immediately it seems like a contradiction. The overriding problem of the book is how to respect the fact that some things are so different that they seem to be incomparable at the same time as not giving up comparison altogether.

6 Translated by the author. "Die erste Voraussetzung dafür ist eine Theorie mit einem Apparat von Begriffen, Unterscheidungen und Hypothesen ... Die zweite Voraussetzung ist ein überschaubares Corpus von Kulturen mit genügend Unterschieden und Gemeinsamkeiten, die sich sinnvoll vergleichen lassen" (Assmann, 2018, p. 265).

7 Parts of the book have been translated to English, but unfortunately not the chapter that I find most accessible and base this chapter on.

However, Detienne begins by deconstructing some of our assumptions: what is incomparable does not necessarily exist “outside” our own tradition but could already be found within what we call “our own”: Detienne takes our relation to the ancient Greek culture. On the one hand, Greek is important for understanding parts of our language and ideas. On the other hand, many of the ideas and practices of the Greeks are incomprehensible and incomparable to ideas we have today. In other words, the title (*Compare the Incomparable*) questions whether that which is foreign and that which is familiar to us are not necessarily self-evident. What we thought was close and comparable is not, and what we think is distant and incomparable can still be approximated through comparing. But how does he scrutinize this more concretely?

If we look at the chapter “Compare the incomparable of nations” (*Comparer l’incomparable des nations*), he discusses the problem “what does it mean to be national?” In the text, the question is initially presented as a kind of provisional research question for a discussion of three examples: 1) The Vlach people of Macedonia claim to be descended from Alexander the Great’s father Philippe the Second. Until 1946, the Vlachs were nomads, but were then forced to settle. This ethnic group received recognition for their identity in 1997. Detienne then gives an account of a meeting between former US President George Bush and the Vlachs, on an occasion when Bush asked them how many had died for their fatherland. This was a question that surprised and was incomprehensible to the Vlachs. 2) The second example is the Australian Aborigines (who got their name from the British, which is as we know a generic term). Since the British found no sign of agriculture, they concluded that this was a “no man’s land,” freely available (so-called *terra nullius*). Little did they know that the Aborigines had a different but equally fanatical connection to the earth as the British. 3) The third example is the Athenians in ancient Greece, who celebrated every year that they were descended from those who were the origin of humanity and civilization. “The originals” were therefore for the Greeks an exclusive category.

So, did the British, the Vlachs, the Aborigines and the Greeks all have a nation? It is here that our understanding of what it means to compare is put to the test. The simple conclusion is that only the British have a

nation and the others do not and that we cannot compare the British notion of nation to the others. The other people could thus, at first glance, be regarded as incomparable. However, this only captures one (superficial) level of comparability and incomparability. In order to appreciate comparison further we need to have a more radical approach. Detienne writes that:

To compare is to walk around freely, to wander with your hands in your pockets, to go here and there ... By strolling around the question “how to be indigenous” we easily observe that we can establish an autochthony and even how to take root in different ways. (Detienne, 2009, p. 115)⁸

What Detienne show is that the initial question, “what does it mean to be national?” led to a temporary dead end. However, the practice of comparison enables Detienne to articulate another question: “how to be indigenous?” because the question of what it means to be national is linked to a relationship with land and soil. But this relationship with land and soil, on the other hand, seems to be very different. It can be something you are born of (the Athenians), it can be something you worship (the British), and it can be something sacred that is passed down from generation to generation (the Aborigines). Secondly, the question of indigenous peoples opens the question of exclusivity. What does it mean to be original? Can it be originally shared?

In other words, the question “how to be national?” leads to a diversity (in the understanding of land and origin) that sheds light on the one who asks. The “empirical” diversity modifies the unity of comparison. Or as Detienne writes: “To compare is first and foremost to put into perspective ... by putting oneself into perspective” (Detienne, 2009, p. 111). On the one hand, the term “national” leads to the question of new concepts, such as land and origin. Comparing different ways of being national is, in this way, a manner of gaining knowledge about something. But since this is so diverse, it strikes back at the comparative unit itself. Why do we use

8 Translated by the author. “*Comparer, c’est se promener librement, déambuler les mains dans les poches, aller ça et là ... En toupillant donc alentour du “comment être autochtone” on observe aisément qu’on peut fonder une autochtonie et même l’enraciner de différentes manières.*” (Detienne, 2009, p. 115).

this term (national) when it does not exist in the material being studied and when the phenomena associated with the national (land and origin) do not exist in a sufficiently uniform way for them to be comparable (the incomparable)? Something tells us here, through the comparison, that the concept of “nation” is not universal but sheds light on a particular way of thinking. However, according to Detienne, it was not in vain to spend time on the concept of the national. We moved on after all!

Detienne then tries to expand on the question of “how to be national?” By transforming it into “how to settle down” (*comment faire son trou* – literally translated as “how to make a hole in the ground”) as a new comparative entity. Settling down, establishing oneself and connecting to the earth then becomes a new comparative unit. Based on this, Detienne writes in a great passage that: “We compare and experiment by asking ourselves the question why and how. In the exercise we have announced, we see the national as a way for many to look down” (Detienne, 2009, p. 121). As I see it, *the national is thus shifted here from being a constant at the beginning of the comparison to becoming variable in a new comparison*. The national is not universal, but is a peculiar form of the general, which then becomes “to settle down” or “establish oneself”. The result of the comparison is thus that one must put oneself and one’s questions into perspective: One is no longer in the center, but on the periphery. The incomparable, or that which appears in the marginal zone of the first comparison, requires us to alter the perspective of the starting point. This does not mean that we should not have begun where we did but, on the other hand, it does not mean that we can continue from there either.

For me, the link to intercultural thinking is connected to two things here: one is that cultural differences, the incomparable, are maintained and respected. The second is that despite the persistency of the incomparable, a comparability is also, at the same time, created. As an approach to intercultural understanding, this is to me central since connections between cultures are made *not despite of but because of cultural differences and variation*. It is because traditions and cultures are different and incomparable on one level (nationality) that we can discover other levels where they are comparable. And none of this would be discovered without comparison.

We notice a difference here between translation and comparative work, though, since the dialectical process is more articulated and dynamic in the latter, whereas translations are limited to language comparisons and are comprised of practices, contexts, institutions, and phenomena as well. The dialectical process and shift of perspective in Detienne's article on the nation implies not just finding words, but finding human practices across cultures and contexts. On the other hand, it is through language that these generalities across cultures can be articulated, i.e., translated.

But back to our initial question. How does this resonate with the existential approach? We have asked the question: *How does comparison represent an existential opportunity both to put oneself into perspective and/or to create relations with other cultures, religions and worldviews?* In this chapter, I have tried to dwell on the "incomparable" and to highlight the dialectical aspect in the comparative process. With Benjamin and Ricœur, we focused on the constructive aspect in producing connections between languages. In this chapter, we have looked at the obstacles in the process of creating these connections. Furthermore, I have tried to see this in connection to the first-person perspective, since it is clear that Detienne's approach involves a comparing subject. Even though he is more of a scientist and less explicitly philosophical, it is from the perspective of the comparing subject, with her cultural and religious background, that "the incomparable" becomes an obstacle. It is also a comparing subject that can learn something of herself when she must put herself into perspective in order to create the comparable.

What we have seen in Ricœur and Benjamin's philosophies of translation, and in Detienne's approach to comparison, leads us, however, to a third author and topic. What Ricœur, Benjamin and Detienne articulate is that both translations and comparisons "lack" a third-person perspective or objective ground from where the correspondence between languages, cultural and religious phenomena can be perceived. But this "lack" is what continues to generate the translative and comparative activity itself. A perfect correspondence is impossible to establish. The "incomparable" cannot be completely eradicated from comparison, since it is a subject that compares. What is perceived as "incomparable" is the incomparability of a subject, and the comparisons of subjects are never perfect or complete.

Something this “lack” of a third-person perspective reveals, as I see it, is that cultures, religions, and languages are not external to each other but have an internal relation. We have already seen that Benjamin stresses this regarding translation (the internal relation of languages). And we have seen how Detienne shows that the “incomparable” might just as well be “inside” a culture (he reminds us that the Greeks are both close and very distant to us). But the question remains if we still treat comparison from a third-person perspective, where languages, cultures, and religions are external to each other. If translations and comparisons constitute relations that are not mediated through a third-person perspective (of, let us say, a comparatist scientist), then these relations are not *between* cultures, but *internal* to cultures. Whereas the preposition *between* preserves the third-person perspective in making religions and cultures *external* to each other, what we have tried to grasp is the *internal* relation of one culture or religion to another. Intercultural comparison should rather be understood as *intracultural* than *intercultural*. To address this, I will now turn to Raimon Panikkar’s work.

Intracultural comparison

Raimon Panikkar (1918–2010) was a Spanish Jesuit priest and scholar of all kinds, with doctoral degrees in chemistry, philosophy, and theology. His *opera omnia* consists of 12 volumes. One of the many themes that interested Panikkar was intercultural and interreligious dialogue and comparison (Panikkar, 2000). Even within these themes, his authorship is far too vast and profound to be accounted for here, so we will look at how the topic of intercultural/interreligious comparison is presented in some of his texts. My account is not an exegetical and exhaustive interpretation of Panikkar’s work, but an attempt to understand how he envisions comparison when reading some of his texts. On the official Raimon Panikkar home page, one can read the following quote that condenses Panikkar’s academic approach and spiritual position: “I started as a Christian, I discovered I was a Hindu and returned as a Buddhist without having ceased to be a Christian” (raimon-panikkar.org, n.d.). Comparing and connecting religions is thus to Panikkar both a personal experience and an academic quest to which he has his own approach.

At the center of both of Panikkar's cases and examples, as well as his theoretical reflections, are dialogues and interreligious comparisons between Christian and Hindu thinking and traditions. One text that takes on this relation is "Hindu-Christian dialogue. Advaita and bhakti". Here he presents what appear to be the main obstacles to a dialogue between the two traditions:

To mention only a few points: Hinduism is supposed neither to believe in a personal God nor to consider charity the first of religious duties. The concept of Person, which seems essential and indispensable for any exposition of Christian faith, is apparently unknown to the Hindū mind, and so on. From the other side, the more "realized" Hindū who mostly professes advaita¹ considers Christianity an inferior religion because it takes God to be essentially the "other," allowing no union or identification with Him. For the advaitin the concept of person would seem secondary, and so applying it to the Absolute is tantamount to idolatry. (Panikkar, 2013a, p. 217; 2018a, Kindle location 4452)

Panikkar adds that these problems are not merely semantic. From a certain (dogmatic?) perspective, religions and cultures are different. And this difference might be thought of in relational categories, such as superiority and inferiority. And, from the same perspective, they might also have ideas, values, etc. in common, which could stress their equality. But all this is, according to Panikkar, just one level of comparison and dialogue. This corresponds to what we saw above with Ricoeur's discussion of translation. From a theoretical or third-person perspective there might be unsurmountable differences that makes translations and comparisons impossible, or there might be similarities that make them possible. But this is just one perspective or level, which does not reach what Panikkar calls an "authentic dialogue". It is this more "fundamental" or, we might say, existential level that Panikkar addresses.

For an "authentic dialogue" to take place, we must shift focus from seeing religions as external to each other and rather see them as internal (external and internal are my notions). Panikkar highlights this shift terminologically by distinguishing *interreligious* dialogue and comparison from *intrareligious* dialogue and comparison. Even though *interreligious* is intended to indicate a closer relation between the religions, the term

still preserves “externality” between them. Panikkar thus states in regard to religious dialogue something that counts for comparison equally as well:

“Dialogue” is not just an external meeting with somebody who has other ideas than I have. Dialogue in the real sense arises precisely where I (or we) discover the same currents and problems within the religion of the “other” as I (or we) find in my (or our) own religious world. (Panikkar, 2013a, p. 218; Kindle locations 4455–4457).

We can draw two ideas from this: 1) The relation between me and the other is not an external (*interreligious*) relation, but an internal (*intrareligious*) relation, and 2) Dialogical and comparative work is an existential *work with oneself*. When I compare, it is as a subject and human being who learns something about the other and accordingly about myself. This process is not an affirmation of one’s own culture in the sense of being in an ethnocentric echo chamber, but rather indicates that a foreign perspective can make your own “grow”. In different academic fields, this self-reflecting perspective was something we found in Marcel Detienne’s approach, which states that “to compare is to put oneself into perspective”. The experience of “the incomparable” in another culture is what makes the understanding of your own grow.

In his work *in-between* traditions, Panikkar has been misinterpreted and criticized from different “sides”: Those who see his work as a defense of Christianity by absorbing Hinduism into Christianity, those who see his (Christian) theology as a kind of crypto-Hinduism, those who claim he defends “paganism,” etc. However, these readings tend to misinterpret his work. In the text “The category of growth in comparative religion: A critical self-examination,” Panikkar takes on some of the critics to his project in comparative religion:

Ultimately my aim is not to defend or attack either Christianity or any other religion, but to understand the problem. It is precisely because I take seriously Christ’s affirmation that he is the way, the truth, and the life that I cannot reduce his significance only to historical Christianity. It is because I also take seriously the saying of the Gita that all action done with a good intention reaches Krishna

and the message of the Buddha that he points the way to liberation, that I look for an approach to the encounter of religions that will contain not only a deep respect for but an enlightened confidence in these very traditions— and eventually belief in their messages. (Panikkar, 2013b, pp. 107–108; 2018b, Kindle locations 2039–2047)

What has all this to do with comparison? According to Panikkar, the cause for the misunderstandings of his work stem from an insufficient methodological approach in the field of comparative religion:

Most of the misunderstandings in this field arise from the fact that only too often comparisons are made between heterogeneous elements: we judge one religious tradition from inside and the other from outside. Any vision from within, with belief and personal commitment, includes at once the concreteness (and so the limitations) of that particular religion and the universal truth it embodies. A view from outside cannot see this link and judges only by objectified values. But religion, by definition – that is, as what it claims to be – is not completely objectifiable, nor is it reducible to mere subjectivity. (Panikkar, 2013b, p. 109; 2018b, Kindle locations 2074–2078)

This asymmetrical comparison of “one tradition from inside and the other from outside” is basically done in two ways: through interpretation and utilization. One can either *interpret* religious traditions (like Hinduism or Greek religion) through another (Christian), or by *utilizing* concepts from a tradition (Greek or Hindu) to explain doctrines in another (Christian). Panikkar is not directly against this, but he wants us to become aware of an assumption: When we compare (from whatever side we are on) by using notions or interpretations from one culture to understand another (let us say Hindu and Christian religions), we presume to know what Hindu and Christian religions are in advance. But Panikkar turns this upside down. It is *in* and *through* comparing that I understand what both the other and my own religion contains. Or to take one of his examples: It was in using Greek (and hence a “pagan”) language that the early Church could express Christianity. Christianity did not exist outside or prior to its Greek expression. Nor was it englobed by Greek culture, since it created a culture of its own and had connections to the Hebrew language and Jewish culture. Christianity was incarnated

into the body of Greek thought and language. In other words, Greek Christianity is just one kind of Christianity. And accordingly, Hinduism in India is just one kind of Hinduism. As we have seen, Panikkar goes so far as to claim that there is Christianity in Hinduism and Hinduism in Christianity. The point here is that the comparative work creates these connections between traditions, and that these connections are internal to the comparative work of a comparing subject.

But what about the other culture or religion of another comparing subject? Is there not a question of symmetry? Can knowledge be acquired without both sides acknowledging being understood on their own terms? For there to be comparative symmetry, the “other side” must not only accept and recognize the concepts, notions, ideas etc. used in a comparison. In addition, he or she must also take ownership of them in such a way that the comparativists lose exclusiveness to the concepts and notions at play. This seems a bit unclear; what does he mean by this? To illustrate this point, he uses Christianity as an example:

The one reason supporting the resistance to a Christian interpretation seems to be that, with few exceptions, Christ has been considered the monopoly of Christians, as if Christ were *ad usum Delphini*, solely for the benefit of orthodox believers. So, when one simply mentions the name of Christ, other religions understand it in a polemical way, or at least as foreign stuff. (Panikkar, 2013b, p. 116; 2018b, Kindle locations 2209–2212)

What I make of this is that he means that Christ is not exclusive to Christianity. This is, of course, very hard to understand (and possibly to accept) since we immediately think of Christianity as a historical tradition with a lot of cultural baggage. Consequently, we might tend to interpret Panikkar here as expressing ethnocentrism or cultural imperialism, where other religions and cultures could be englobed into Christianity. But as Panikkar tries to show, this kind of comparativism does not have a center that could render it ethnocentric. Comparison reveals (it generates an understanding) that Christian concepts, perceptions, experiences, etc. already exist in Hindu traditions, and that Hindu concepts, perceptions, experiences already exist in Christian traditions. So, one tradition is not superior to or englobes the other. For instance, in comparing Hindu and

Christian traditions, Panikkar comes to see *advaita* (the radical insight of non-dual reality) in the Christian notion of love. In other words, *advaita* is not an exclusive Hindu spiritual notion, but has equivalents in the Christian tradition as well. But before we began this intrareligious comparison, we did not realize this. As long as we do not engage in radical comparison, this is never perceived, let alone recognized. As Panikkar states: “To know what a religion says, we must understand what it says, but for this we must somehow believe in what it says.” (Panikkar, 2013b, pp. 118–119; Kindle location 2261). Furthermore, in another place:

I am making the fundamental assumption: the ultimate religious fact does not lie in the realm of doctrine or even individual self-consciousness. Therefore, it can – and may well be – be present everywhere and in any religion. (Panikkar, 2013b, p. 110; Kindle location 2082)

Comparisons of religions are thus pivotal, since they engage in existential encounters that are the driving force in spiritual life:

The encounter of religions today is vital for the religious life of our contemporary time; otherwise, traditional religions will remain altogether obsolete, irrelevant relics of the past, and what is worse, we will be uprooted and impoverished. (Panikkar, 2013b, p. 113; 2018b Kindle locations 2159–2160)

It is important to note here, of course, that Panikkar’s existential approach takes him deep into a personal exploration of truth in religion. For someone skeptical to religion in general or the religion of others this might indicate limitations to a more neutral approach to intercultural comparison.

Panikkar’s use of the notion “intrareligious” is, however, a bit confusing, since, to a certain extent, it breaks with how the term is used in intercultural studies. One example is the philosopher Heinz Kimmerle, who classifies the Western discussion of what philosophy is as an *intracultural* dialogue (within the Western tradition there is systematic philosophy, dialogical philosophy, aphoristic philosophy, an essay tradition, and a narrative tradition, to mention some) (Kimmerle, 2002, p. 77). To him, *intercultural* philosophy is, on the other hand, when even more foreign forms of philosophy go into dialogue (“*ein höherer Grad ... Fremdheit vorauszusetzen ist*”) (Kimmerle, 2002, p. 86). How can we understand

and accept Panikkar's break with this understanding? Is it just semantics or do the terms have different meanings?

From what we have seen, the preposition *intra* rather than *inter* expresses that the relation (between religions and cultures) is not external but internal. The level of intracultural comparison is, as far as I can see, the depth you reach beyond the surface of similarities and differences. It is not because the notion of *dharma* is a common notion to Buddhist and Hindu traditions that renders them apt for comparison. These similarities could be understood on a historical and geographical level. Intracultural comparison, however, seeks similarity on an existential level. Let us go back to the example from Detienne. When he writes that "to settle down" (*faire son trou*) is a more general human trait than the phenomena of the nation, then what was considered "outside" (e.g., the Vlach, the Aborigines, and also the Greeks) the British (and hence the Western-European) culture was inside the comparativists' culture all the time. It is intracultural comparison that helps us to appreciate this internal relation between cultures, traditions, and religions.

Concluding remarks: On the existential significance of comparison

If we are to draw some conclusions regarding the question (of *how comparison represents an existential opportunity to put oneself into perspective and/or to create relations to other cultures, religions, and worldviews*), it seems important to me to emphasize some of the common issues and ideas addressed by the authors referred to in this chapter.

First, they think of comparisons (and translations) as *ways of constructing relations* between (people with various) cultures and languages, and not just as an epistemological tool for knowledge. Furthermore, these relations could be described as a kind of cultural, religious, and linguistic kinship. This kinship is not historical but is rather a spiritual or existential kinship.

This is linked to my second observation, that this practice of creating relations and articulating cultural kinships entails a dialectical aspect. To compare is to be faced with obstacles, of the incomparable, only to discover that the obstacles, to a large extent, stem from the comparing subject. Or, to

put it differently, the incomparable is neither outside me nor inside me, but exists in my *relation* with what I am comparing. The incomparable is not necessarily something that could be incorporated into my culture or worldview, or something that remains outside my worldview or culture. It exists in my relation to the foreign. Whether it remains excluded from my comprehension depends to a certain extent on my ability to change perspective. Detienne thus articulates a “third way,” stating that: “to compare is to put oneself into perspective” (2009). It is the perspective of the comparativist that is transformed in comparing the incomparable.

The third point is that this calls for an articulation of an “internal” aspect in comparison. Both the *relations* and *kinship* between languages, cultures, and religions, and the discussion of *the incomparable* highlight the existential point of departure from comparison. This existential perspective is not solipsistic or ethnocentric in the sense that the foreign, the other, the different, has no place. On the contrary, the obstacles to comparison and understanding have a place. But they only have a place in as much as I am a comparing subject. From this perspective, I have seen fit to call this comparison “intracultural” and to call upon Raimon Panikkar’s notion and thoughts on *intracultural* comparison. From a third-person perspective, differences and similarities between cultures seem to be outside me and, to a certain extent, they are. But if the aim for me as a comparing subject is to learn something about myself in putting myself into perspective, to compare the incomparable, and articulate a spiritual kinship to other cultures and traditions, then the otherness of a person, culture, language, religion, or worldview is internal *to the relation* that I have. By this, I do not simply mean that the foreign culture could be englobed into my own. It means, as Ricœur stresses, that I am not internal to myself and that it is through the other culture, religion, or worldview that I understand myself.

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