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# Interreligious Comparisons in Religious Studies and Theology

Comparison Revisited

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Perry Schmidt-Leukel and Andreas Nehring

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## Comparison as a Necessary Evil: Examples from Indian and Jewish Worlds

Philippe Bornet

### Introduction

In what is often considered the founding text of the study of religions as an academic discipline, *Introduction to the Science of Religion* (1873), Friedrich Max Müller (1823–1900) included an essay on 'False Analogies in Comparative Theology'.<sup>1</sup> He writes in the introduction:

Very different from the *real similarities* that can be discovered in nearly all the religions of the world, and which, owing to their deeply human character, in no way necessitate the admission that one religion borrowed from the other, are those minute coincidences between the Jewish and the Pagan religions which have so often been discussed by learned theologians.<sup>2</sup>

He goes on to survey different instances of comparison that he perceived as paradigmatic of the method's risks or 'evils'. Müller takes his examples from the history of studies on India, emphasizing in particular the tendency to look for Christian motives, such as the Trinity or biblical names, in the Indian material. He traces this tendency to Christian missionaries, looking for both proof of a primeval revelation that would have spread all over the world (in order to preserve a biblical view of global history) and arguments for evangelizing. Müller insists that such a method is both inadequate and ideologically dangerous,<sup>3</sup> and criticizes scholars from the Asiatic Society of Calcutta for perpetuating this type of highly compromised comparison.<sup>4</sup> Adding further examples, Müller targets more recent works guilty of the same 'superficiality', such as the book *Tree and Serpent Worship* (1868) by James Fergusson (1808–86). Its author, a specialist of architecture who spent a major part of his life in India, brings together comparative evidence for a ritual centred on trees and snakes that would have spread in ancient times from India to different regions, as far as Scandinavia.<sup>5</sup> A last example is Louis Jacolliot's (1837–90) popular study on Jesus in India, *La Bible dans l'Inde, vie de Jezus Christna* (1869), in which the author enumerates similarities in names (e.g. Christus and Kṛṣṇa) and in narrative motifs (Isaac's vs. Śunakēpa's sacrifice) to suggest real historical contacts. Jacolliot concluded that a number of biblical stories,

from both the Hebraic Bible and the New Testament, were nothing more than borrowings from Indian mythology. All the examples put forward by Müller mirror and reinforce the scholar's own convictions by substantially deforming (or, in some cases, inventing) the compared data, inscribing it in a grand diffusionist scheme. As expected, Müller is extremely virulent against such approaches, and writes:

But when coincidences between different religions and mythologies are searched out simply in support of preconceived theories, whether by the friends or enemies of religion, the sense of truth, the very life of all science, is sacrificed, and serious mischief will follow without fail.<sup>6</sup>

At the same time, in the same collection of essays, Müller declares that comparison is essential for *Religionswissenschaft* as an academic discipline, transposing Goethe's famous formula about the knowledge of languages to religions: 'Knowing one was knowing none.'<sup>7</sup> In the first 'lecture on the science of religion', comparison is recognized as an essential operation that characterizes 'scientific knowledge' in general: 'All higher knowledge', writes Müller, 'is acquired by comparison, and rests on comparison.'<sup>8</sup> Of course, by modern standards, Müller's own comparative approach is equally problematic for a number of reasons, not least because it still operates from within a Christian-centric model that informs his classification of religions and his categories.<sup>9</sup> However, it is remarkable that Müller felt the need to legitimize his method by simultaneously warning against the risks of comparison. Since then, the concern of comparison remained both vital for the study of religions (because without comparison, no generalization or theorization is possible) and controversial (because comparison can easily lead the scholar astray), to the point that one might wonder whether this very debate is one of the distinctive traits of the discipline.

The present contribution first briefly identifies distinct conceptions of comparison in the study of religions, before outlining recent debates and assessing possible uses of comparison through an actual example. We conclude with a few insights about what comparative works can yield for the study of religions in the future.

### Comparing comparisons

#### Genealogical comparison

Roughly following Jonathan Z. Smith's categorization, it is possible to distinguish two fundamentally distinct modes of comparison: analogical and genealogical.<sup>10</sup> In the genealogical mode – seen, for example, in the background of Fergusson's work – compared elements are considered to be genetically derived one from another, and the focus is on similarities within a common historical framework. The rationale involves processes of diffusion, borrowing and transmission of cultural or religious traits from one culture to another and/or from one period to another. In the study of religions, this is the comparison of biblical scholars, linguists such as Müller himself, Indo-Europeanists (Georges Dumézil) and most evolutionist thinkers (Edward B. Tylor).

With this form, at least three major risks are immediately perceptible. First is the tendency to systematically interpret similarities in terms of cultural (or biological) diffusion, whereas similar anthropological, religious, cultural and literary traits can very well appear independent from each other. A second risk consists of positing a theory of history privileging Culture A as the exclusive source of influences observed in Culture B – as in the cases of Ferguson or Jacolliot, with reified conceptions of cultures and unidirectional diffusion. This view often mirrors a concern with attaching a prestigious 'pedigree' to a specific cultural or political artefact.<sup>11</sup> The third risk is to privilege similarities and discard divergences, because they do not reveal any 'influence' and hence are considered of lesser significance.

This mode of comparison remains, however, central to undermining a conception of cultures as closed worlds by focusing on the flows that connect and shape them. Examples include comparative analysis of Greek and Near Eastern epics, shedding light on the various influences that shaped *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*,<sup>12</sup> or, more recently, historical works interested in 'entangled' or 'connected histories', such as Sidney Mintz's cultural history of sugar<sup>13</sup> or Sanjay Subrahmanyam's study of millenarisms at the end of the Middle Ages in the Eurasian area.<sup>14</sup> An attention to processes of interaction (as opposed to unidirectional flows or evolutions) and an equal treatment of sources from both contexts can successfully limit the aforementioned risks.

### Analogical (or homological) comparison

Another mode of comparison is analogical, in which elements that are not geographically and historically related are brought into relation. Most works attempting to develop a 'morphology of religion', like those of Cornelis Tiele, Gerardus van der Leeuw, Mircea Eliade and other phenomenologists of religion, rely on this type of comparison. They find in historical data instances of general categories, be it 'mystic prayer', 'sacred' or 'religious feeling' – as witnessed in Eliade's *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (1958). In some form, the strong version of this approach survives today in certain cognitive studies of religion, in the works of Harvey Whitehouse or Ilkka Pyysiäinen, for example, who look for similar religious traits and experiences – rooted this time in human nature – in the most varied of sociocultural contexts.<sup>15</sup> A similar comparative scheme is at work in 'reductionist' approaches, such as those of Durkheim, Freud or, more recently, Boyer, which rely on a universal and trans-historical point of comparison from which 'religion' is thought to originate, be it society, the human psyche or the brain.

Of course, the risks of such an approach are many. First, there is the question of the ontological status of the *tertium comparationis*; to what degree can it be considered a universal *datum* that has 'trans-historical' value – especially given the highly idiosyncratic (Euro- and Christian-centric) history of the concepts related to 'religion'?<sup>16</sup> Second, related to this, the scholar's own interests have often failed to be recognized as being necessarily reflected in the abstract categories, resulting in the creation of implicit, Eurocentric taxonomies. An extreme example of this bias is Tiele's taxonomy of religions, in which religions are classified according to an essentially Christian, Troeltschian categorization.<sup>17</sup> Third is the decontextualization of compared items, which are frequently extracted from their respective historical and discursive

contexts, especially if a large number of items are being compared. Fourth and finally, the search for similarities – or, rather, identities – between the compared entities can lead to a tautological methodology, in which instances of the *tertium comparationis* are systematically brought to light in the compared contexts, focusing on examples 'which work and strategically forgetting those which do not, concurrently obliterating the contextual, discursive specificities of each case.

### Recent approaches

Recent approaches have tried to address the issues mentioned under each mode of comparison, discussing in particular the nature of comparative categories and the goal of comparison as an intellectual operation.

To avoid essentializing comparative categories, a strategy may consist of conceiving comparative categories such as 'religion', 'ritual' or 'myth', after a Wittgensteinian 'family resemblance'. This is the method employed by Benson Saler in his *Conceptualizing Religion* (1993), where he suggests defining the category of 'religion' in a polythetic way for use in anthropological studies – thus eschewing the need for a permanent or universal comparative category.<sup>18</sup> This strategy might seem appealing at first, but is not without its own limits: according to Saler, the *tertium comparationis* is a polythetic 'prototype', conceptualized 'in terms of a pool of elements that more or less tend to occur together in the best exemplars of the category' (225). Looking for 'exemplars' of the category in the actual data, Saler seems to imply that the contexts studied by the scholar will present characteristics allowing an easy categorization in the terms of one of the prototype's possible combinations. This top-down view is, therefore, not entirely devoid of normativity. Moreover, Saler insists that the prototype is conceived in reference to Western religions, essentially accepting, and even owning, the ethnocentrism of the method – a move that is understandable and pragmatic, but that might also sound like a circular (and resolutely pessimistic) strategy.<sup>19</sup> Finally, Saler focuses almost exclusively on the concept of 'religion', thus creating boundaries with non-religious domains and suggesting that this is the most productive comparative entry for a comparative study of religions, which may or may not be the case, depending on the context of a given study.

A whole issue of the journal *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* (1996) focused on the question of a 'new comparativism' as theorized by the American scholar William Paden, consisting of morphological comparisons between 'patterns of religion'. Patterns are themes (purity, mythic time), generic topics (power, authority), classes of religious practices (rites of passage), specific institutions (Passover), common functions (maintaining order), characteristic religious forms (relics), etc. that do not presuppose any universal religious element.<sup>20</sup> Paden, moreover, insists that patterns are freely chosen and that the comparative process entails interaction between theoretical and empirical levels. As he writes, somewhat provocatively,

When I hear a Sioux spokesman say that the buffalo are not gone because they can never die, I hear a stream of associations like, 'there was never a time when He was not', or 'the holy cemetery of Najaf has always existed', or 'the Vedas (or the Qur'an

or the Torah) are the eternal blueprint of the world; or, according to President Bush, 'Freedom is given by God from the beginning.' No one would say these are all the same, but they all do bear a point of resemblance relative to the theme of mythicizing sacred objects by understanding them as existing at the foundation of the world. They are all something 'we've seen before.'<sup>21</sup>

In response to Paden's exposition, Donald Wiebe observes that this approach is mostly constructed in opposition to an Eliadean concept of comparison – a critique that does not do much more than rehearse Edmund Leach's criticism of Eliade in the 1960s.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, Paden maintains that comparing patterns permits general explanations about religion, but he does not exactly explain how to go from the specific to the general.<sup>23</sup> Related to this, one might add the concern that Paden does not indicate where his patterns come from, and tends to isolate them from their context of occurrence without paying much attention to the specific situations in which they appear – a factor that can influence their meaning radically.

At a higher level of abstraction, the historian of religions J. Z. Smith sees in the comparative categories mere scholarly construction and, in comparison, an intellectual operation that is crucial for theorizing. 'Map is not territory';<sup>24</sup> he argued, meaning that the academic study of religion needs an analytical vocabulary – a vocabulary built and revised through comparison to which is assigned an essentially heuristic purpose. In a personal interview a few years – Smith still insisted that comparison is to historians of religions what experimentation is to researchers in biology or chemistry:

For someone in the human sciences, comparison is our form of experimentation. We are not allowed to experiment on human beings, fortunately. But if I am right, what we do with comparison is to take something out of its place, something else out of its place, and put them in a place that is in our head. That results in disturbing the environment of that thing, as the scientists do when they alter the environment in an experiment. They torture the elements so as to make them speak. Our way to doing it is by putting them by neighbors that they never intended to have, and to see what happens.<sup>25</sup>

For such a project, it is by no means necessary to postulate reified comparative categories that are universal, such as 'religion,' 'magic,' 'sacred' or 'mysticism.' On the contrary, the *tertium comparationis* is elaborated – or imagined – specifically for the purpose of the research. However, comparing 'to see what happens,' in Smith's words, is certainly not satisfactory: specific intellectual goals need to be assigned to the comparative work. Equally unsatisfying, or partially so, is Smith's famous and provocative claim that 'religion is only the product of the scholar's imagination.'<sup>26</sup> If many contemporary scholars of religion have uncritically endorsed this claim (perhaps in haste to oppose an Eliadean concept of religion), it is crucial to stress that the scholar is not imagining his or her object out of nothing, and that there is no possible *tabula rasa*. The object is, rather, carefully constructed, taking into account the history of the concept's uses as well as its inscription in pre-existing semantic networks – it is more about rejoining a debate than imagining an object.

While these theoretical insights might sound promising, it is more complicated to examine how exactly comparison should work in practice: by one scholar or a team of

specialists? Focusing on one or several traditions? Comparing what (texts, practices, images, etc.)? And expecting what results exactly? Theoretical models of comparison need to be actually tested with examples – otherwise, the theory remains just theory and is virtually useless. To get a closer view of the problems, intellectual operations and possible results entailed by a study comparing independent corpuses, I would like to present a few elements from recent work.<sup>27</sup>

## Comparison in practice: Hospitality in rabbinic and brahmanical normative literature

### Building a comparison

This study starts with a working definition of the category in the role of *tertium comparationis*. The present case focuses on the notion of 'hospitality,' a notion that is not immediately or obviously related to 'religion' but that intersects with 'religious' and 'ritual' issues in significant ways. Hospitality is defined as 'the temporary reception of a guest in a home,' with an intended indeterminateness concerning the notions of 'temporary,' 'guest' and 'home,' which can take different meanings depending on the sources. A recurring question is, then, why, under one set of circumstances, a text encourages hospitality, whereas under another set of circumstances, hospitality is perceived as a concern.

The topic is studied in normative texts that stem from two historically and geographically disconnected traditions: rabbinic Judaism and brahmanism. For the rabbinic context, the focus is primarily on the Mishna, but also on the rich discussions recorded in later rabbinic literature, in the Palestinian and Babylonian Gemaras. To this are added the short tractates dealing with etiquette and 'decorum,' mainly *Derekh Erets Rabbah* and *Derekh Eretz Zuta*. The date of composition of those texts is highly debated: for the Mishna, the *terminus post quem* is probably around the beginning of the third century. The other texts can be situated in a timespan of approximately 200–600 CE. On the brahmanic side, the work deals with *dharma* tractates – that is, the various *dharmaśāstra* and *dharmaśāstra*, dated between 300 BCE and 300 CE, with more recent additions. All authored within brahmanical circles, the texts are originally 'school literature' belonging to specific Vedic schools, but seem to have progressively made their way into broader audiences.

Given this corpus, the following methodological considerations guided the work:

1. The two compared contexts (A and B) are concrete arrays of sources (in the present case, written texts, but they could very well be pictures or oral testimonies) that are studied independently, respecting their inner logic, and are given an equal attention. The work is not about comparing religions or traditions, but, rather, discourses: documents stemming from one group and addressing (and attempting to produce an effect on) a specific audience.
2. Such a corpus removes any ambiguity concerning the interpretation of similarities or differences: it is taken for granted that the two contexts are *not* genetically related and that the comparison is 'analogueal.' Methodologically,

- the study of elements belonging to traditions that diverge significantly from a Christian (or Protestant) model of religion provide leverage to question certain 'traditional' assumptions in the study of religions, making this choice somewhat strategic – much as Barbara Holdrege argued in her book *Veda and Torah*.<sup>28</sup>
3. All sources belong to a similar literary genre: they teach proper modes of behaviour, not only in ritual matters but also for tasks carried out in everyday life, including hospitality, which is specifically conceptualized as such;<sup>29</sup> they describe a social world as it should be, and not as it actually was.<sup>30</sup>

### Hospitality: Practices and discourses

A passage from the Babylonian Talmud speaks in detail about hospitality received by Sages who travelled to and were hosted by a local community. The text apparently traces back to tannaitic/Roman imperial times<sup>31</sup> and is formulated in the post Bar-Kokhba context of a 'synod', gathering the most eminent figures of rabbinic Judaism.<sup>32</sup> The passage is composed in the form of a 'farewell benediction' from the rabbis, thanking their hosts before departing, proceeding with a series of a fortiori arguments (*gal wa-homer*): the text first associates a mitigated example of hospitality with a positive result before listing the consequences of a generous demonstration of hospitality, such as the one shown by the locals to the *tannaim*. For example:

1 R. Eliezer, the son of R. Yose the Galilean<sup>33</sup> began to speak in praise of hospitality (*akhsanya*), expounding the verse: 'And the Lord blessed Oved-Edom and all his house ... because of the Ark of God.'<sup>34</sup> Have we not here an argument *a fortiori*? If such was the reward for attending to the ark which did not eat or drink, but before he merely swept and laid the dust, how much more will it be for one who entertains a scholar in his house (*talmid hakham*) and gives him to eat and drink and allows him the use of his possessions (*u'khasim*)!<sup>35</sup>

Comparing the intendance work for the ark (which does not eat nor drink) with the hosting of the Sages (who are more demanding than the ark), the text praises 'hospitality' as an important value. The reasoning entails an almost literal equation between the Torah and the Sages who spread their knowledge by travelling. The text shows, on the one hand, that the Sages tend to look at themselves as the incarnated Torah and, on the other hand, that a deed consisting of receiving the Torah in one's house will be duly rewarded. The same text assumes a particularly generous conception of hospitality, since it includes not only a meal and lodging, but also the sharing of belongings (*u'khasim*).<sup>36</sup> It is revealing that the Sages felt the need to compose such homilies, as if it were not evident that the locals would invite them – and some texts, indeed, suggest that the Sages were not always welcome everywhere.<sup>37</sup> This kind of narrative can probably be read in the light of the hypothesis of a relatively marginalized group of rabbis, representing one group among several, but invariably depicting themselves as the most authorized representatives of Israel and Jewish groups in general.<sup>38</sup> In any case, the domestic practice of hospitality is integrated into a cosmological complex and retributive system that may (also) explain the absence of reciprocity, in particular when rabbis are involved. Other texts connect hospitality

with more elaborate lists of rewards, distinguishing between actions that are expected as duties and supererogatory acts.<sup>39</sup>

With a similar mechanism, a second text – also referring to a Palestinian tradition but compiled in the Babylonian Talmud – establishes an explicit link between the social practice of hospitality and a sacrificial deed:

That passeth by us continually (*tamid*) (2 R 4, 9). R. Jose son of R. Hanina<sup>40</sup> said in the name of R. Eliezer b. Jacob<sup>41</sup>: If a man (*adam*) entertains (*u'areah*) a scholar (*talmid hakham*) in his house and lets him enjoy his possessions, Scripture accounts it to him as if he had sacrificed the daily burnt-offering (*u'midin*).<sup>42</sup>

The text proceeds in a typically Talmudic style, proving a statement using a biblical wordplay on *tamid* (which concurrently means 'perpetual' as an adjective and 'perpetual sacrifice'; one kind of sacrifice performed daily at the Jerusalem Temple, as a substantive). The text presents, therefore, a possible substitute for the ritual and, at the same time, legitimates a social practice involving 'laics' (*adam*) and 'scholars' (*talmid hakham*). It must be noted, however, that other activities, such as prayer or study, are equally considered valid substitutes for sacrifices. But the principle of a 'ritualization' of the domestic space by the association with abrogated sacrificial practices comes up consistently in the texts.

In other situations, however, hospitality can lead to various dangers. Typically, intercourse with people who do not observe the Torah is strongly discouraged. This is the case for many texts dealing with the social category of the *'ammey ha-'ares*, the 'people of the land', the 'ignorants'. Whereas one may wonder whether the frequentation of learned men could not contribute to educating those ignorants, the texts show a concern for purity and interpersonal contact. Thus, a curious text from the Mishna warns that a *haver* ('companion') should not entertain in his domain a *'am ha-'ares* (in this context, a person who does not scrupulously observe prescriptions of purity and tithes) who is wearing clothes:

3 He who undertakes to be a *haver*, ... does not accept the hospitality of an *'am ha-'ares* [we *'enu mit'areah 'esel 'am ha-'ares*] and does not receive him when he [the *am ha-'ares*] is wearing his own clothes.<sup>43</sup>

The prescription concerning the clothes implies that not the interpersonal contact itself but purity concerns<sup>44</sup> are the problem. Such specific and technical rules were variously reinterpreted and extrapolated to apply to different situations. Progressively, the *haver* will represent the rabbi and the *'am ha-'ares* will represent a Jewish person outside of the rabbinic circle, who stands out for his/her ignorance of the Torah. A text from a later context<sup>45</sup> illustrates this point perfectly: in a time of hardship, Rabbi Yehuda ha-Nasi (traditionally considered to be the compiler of the Mishna) invited people for a meal at his home and explicitly excluded the *'ammey ha-'ares* from the list of guests. One person came and admitted not knowing anything about the Torah. Rabbi Yehuda feeds him, but almost immediately regrets his action: having shared food with an ignorant. The text soon reveals that the person was none other than Rabbi Yonathan b. Amran,<sup>46</sup> who had hidden his knowledge out of modesty. Both passages emphasize the sensitivity of contacts with members of the literate elite, for reasons that pertain

to rules of purity (the context of our first text) or, later, to concerns related to the preservation of a tradition that conforms with the wishes of its guardians.

Other problematic situations of hospitality arise in the intercourse with 'idolaters' (*noḥri*, 'oved' *avoda zarah*, etc.) or non-Jewish people (*goy*). Critical factors are here related to questions of purity/impurity and the risk of intermarriages, but also friendship and the necessity to preserve good social relations among neighbours. In general, the situation of a Jewish guest invited by a non-Jewish host is more problematic than the opposite – because the guest is not in a position to control the framework of the interaction. In a number of situations, however, pragmatic compromises between strict observance of the rules and the preservation of social relations are found (a principle called *darke shalom*, 'the ways of peace', 'social peace'): probably the sign of certain concessions from the rabbinic circle, in an effort to reach out to larger audiences and avoid complete isolation.<sup>47</sup>

This overly succinct survey of a limited number of cases already shows that hospitality is related to sensitive issues, such as the spread of the rabbinic movement itself, the relation to the Torah, the observance of purity rules, social hierarchies, etc. It also clearly witnesses a process of 'ritualization' of the social practice through its recurring association with either past ritual practices (sacrifices) or merits to be obtained in this world or in the next. Even if not spectacular, practices of hospitality can be considered under the umbrella of highly ritualized actions that have major social consequences.

Turning now to the Indian context, the majority of *dharma* texts present hospitality as an even more sensitive practice, explicitly connected not only to the identity of the brahmanical group, but also to the performance of rituals. A text from the Āpastamba Dharmasūtra emphasizes, for example, the technical and restricted meaning of the word for guest, *atithi*:

- 3 A guest (*atithi*) comes blazing like a fire. 4 When someone has studied one branch from each of the Vedas in accordance with the Law, he is called a 'vedic scholar' (*śrotriya*). 5 When such a man comes to the home of a householder devoted to the Law proper to him – and he comes for no other purpose than to discharge the Law – then he is called a 'guest' (*atithi*).<sup>48</sup>

In this passage, a householder (*gṛhastha*) is required to welcome any learned scholar (*śrotriya*). The notion of *atithi* is restricted here to the *śrotriya*, defined as someone – a Brahmin, to be sure – having put a particular emphasis on the study of the Veda. The comparison with fire (*śritra* 3) certainly does not primarily mean that the unsatisfied guest could burn his host's house (an explanation found among certain classical commentators). Rather, the text alludes to the fact that hospitality can be viewed, quite literally, as a sacrifice. As fire is the regular place for a 'real' sacrifice, the mouth of a *śrotriya* Brahmin will consecrate and burn the food given to him. The social practice works as a full sacrifice, and a number of texts describe, in an extremely precise way, analogies between various gestures of hospitality (the greeting, the washing of the feet, the preparation of food, etc.) and sacrificial gestures. For example:

- 1 This is the sacrifice to Prājapati that a householder offers incessantly... 4 When milk is poured over it, that food is equal to an *agnisoma* sacrifice: when ghee

is poured over it, it is equal to an *ukhya* sacrifice; when honey is poured over it, it is equal to an *atirātra* sacrifice; when meat is poured over it, it is equal to a *dvādaśha* sacrifice; and when water is poured over it, it procures the increase of progeny and a long life.<sup>49</sup>

As a sacrifice, the correct exercise of hospitality is a way either to accomplish duties (*vidhi*) or to gain rewards (*vikalpa*) – sometimes (but not always) included in a system entailing the principle of rebirths. Conversely, a deficient demonstration of hospitality brings a range of negative consequences, as clearly stated in the following text:

- 6 When a Brahmin who has come to someone's house seeking a place to stay is given nothing to eat, he leaves taking with him all the good works of that man.<sup>50</sup>

The association of hospitality with a complex retributive system is also evident in the notion of the five 'great sacrifices' (*pañca mahāyajña*) that are prescribed daily to any householder (*gṛhastha*) and which explicitly include hospitality (to a Brahmin, surely) as the sacrifice specifically accomplished for humans (*nr-/manuṣya-yajña*). From this perspective, the unfolding of hospitality as a full ritual has wide consequences for both parties of the interaction.

At the same time, hospitality is not without its dangers and anxieties. That every *atithi* should be welcomed does not mean (as seen in the first text) that every 'guest' should be equally treated. As can be guessed on the basis of the analogy, the consequences associated with the reception of a Brahmin differ radically from members from other *varṇa*, for only Brahmins can play the role of the fire. Persons belonging to other *varṇa* are technically not 'guests' (*atithi*), but can be received, provided they are not heretics:

- 110 A *ksatriya* is not called 'guest' [*atithi*]; nor is a *vaiśya*, a *śūdra*, a friend, a relative, or an elder. If, however, a *ksatriya* comes to his [of a Brahmin] house fulfilling the conditions of a guest, he should show kindness and feed him (*bhojayed*) after the Brahmins have finished their meal.<sup>51</sup>

A householder can certainly invite them, but it is a possibility and not an actual duty. As we see, the modalities of the reception reflect the social status of the guests: *Vaiśya* and *Śūdra* (considered here to be on the same level) can share a meal with the householders' servants, and will only eat leftovers (as the wife usually does) after everybody else has eaten. Thus, the hierarchical structure of the society is mirrored and reinforced in practical rules concerning the unfolding of hospitality.<sup>52</sup>

Finally, a number of texts exclude certain classes from any interaction altogether:

- 29 No guest should stay at his house without being honored with a seat, food, and a bed, or with water, roots, and fruits, according to his ability. 30 He must [however] never honor the following even with a word of welcome: ascetics of heretical sects (*pāśanāināḥ*), individuals engaging in improper activities (*vikarmashān*), observing the 'cat vow' (*pañcālavratikān*), or following the way of herons (*bakavṛttin*), hypocrites (*śaḥān*), and sophists (*patikān*).<sup>53</sup>

The detailed aspect of this passage shows clearly the extreme sensitivity of hospitality. Fully assimilated into a ritual in some cases, it can also negatively affect the worldview

represented by the texts' composers and their position in society. We are left with the impression that practices of hospitality as prescribed in these texts represent a powerful tool in the hands of the literate elite to promote their view of an ideal society by intervening at the 'intimate' level of domestic households.

### Comparative analysis

From here, one might ask the provocative question: 'What then?' How can this lead us further in the research? Taking this question seriously, the first element to observe before even attempting a comparative analysis is that texts are discourses, presupposing intentionality and an audience. This simple element can explain why a topic is more or less developed, is given more or less weight in one or another context. Thus, while rabbinic texts discuss the question of different classes of foreigners at length, naming them with sophisticated categories (*ger*, *nôkhrî*, *oved* *avodah zarah*, *goy*, *min*, etc.), those questions are virtually ignored by the *dharma* texts, in which the categories of *mleccha* or *yavana* (different classes of 'foreigners' from a brahmanical point of view) are not extensively dealt with, to say the least. It seems that the horizon of rabbinic texts is broader than that of the brahmanical *dharma* texts.

Similarly, nuances in the literary genres need to be taken into account. For example, the notion of 'guest' in Sanskrit, *atithi*, is not defined in the same way in purely normative statements or in versified quotations that are inserted into the *sîtra*; similar variations can be observed between *halakhic* and *aggadic* texts in Hebrew – *aggadic* texts tending to be hyperbolic and not meant to be interpreted literally.

Beyond such considerations, our example sheds light on three different contexts: the respective socio-historical, the socio-anthropological and the reflexive level.

### At the level of each context: Comparison as a hermeneutic device

On one level, comparison is used as a device for developing new insights on a topic that has already been studied.<sup>54</sup> In the present case, notwithstanding numerous and important divergences, there is a process that appears remarkably similar between both sets of texts: the process of the 'domesticization' of ritual gestures, or, symmetrically, of the ritualization of domestic practices – a process that the texts strive to enact. In both contexts, the references to the sacrificial tradition contribute to making specific social behaviours authoritative.

Around the second and third centuries, rabbis related a number of social and domestic practices to past ritual gestures: along with study and prayers, domestic hospitality underwent a process of 'ritualization' and could even be considered as one valid substitute for sacrifices once offered in the Jerusalem Temple (among others). At the same time, hospitality was related to a system of 'merits,' making it more pressing and sensitive. This emphasis on the ritual aspect of hospitality can hint towards the centrality of such social practices in rebuilding a tradition centred on the rabbis and their teachings. Arguably, travels and domestic hospitality played a major role in the very constitution of a 'rabbinic movement,' structuring a group and its identity against

competing groups, making it relevant and authoritative – in its legal and religious functions, for example.<sup>55</sup>

In quite a similar way, but for different socio-historical reasons, brahmanical texts put an emphasis on domestic rituals, asserting that domestic sacrifices (such as hospitality) performed by a householder (*grihastha*) achieve, in the end, an effect equivalent to more complicated and expensive sacrifices, such as the *śrauta* sacrifices. This focus could hint at an actual need from the brahmanical side to reassert its authority when important changes occur in the society. In this light, the theological construct of the five 'great sacrifices' that are prescribed daily to every householder, and that include hospitality, is a powerful tool to spread practices at a domestic level. Asserting with authority that a single domestic sacrifice achieves the same result as a costly 'solemn sacrifice' represents a tremendous discount, probably as an attempt to fight the growing influence of competition from Buddhist, Jain and other groups.<sup>56</sup>

The genius of the religious elites – which function in both contexts as 'textual communities'<sup>57</sup> – consists in presenting this reconfiguration in such a way that it is perceived as natural or transparent. The exegetical tools developed in each tradition precisely contribute to preserve a tight relation with a corpus of texts conceived as revealed, despite the major changes that intervened in their respective socio-historical contexts.<sup>58</sup> In this sense, and as noted by Lincoln in a recent essay on comparison, the similarities between the two sets of texts 'reflect similar points of tension in the social structure of the people among whom the stories circulated.'<sup>59</sup>

Those similar trajectories need, however, to be contrasted with substantial differences. Diverging from sacrifices in the rabbinic context, classical or elaborated forms of sacrifice (*śrauta*) did not suddenly disappear in the brahmanical context but were partly continued and partly replaced with more elementary rites.<sup>60</sup> Similarly, domestic practices prescribed in brahmanical texts are not a particularly 'recent' creation; they are already mentioned in older texts, such as the Aharva Veda or the Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa. Another major difference appears in the respective visions of the ideal society mediated by the texts. Rabbinic texts defend a principle of equality and encourage the study of Torah among all – study being, at least in theory, a value related to a personal choice and not one's social condition at birth. This principle is reflected in practices of commensality, in which a whole group partakes in a meal – even if simultaneously reinforcing hierarchies. By contrast, the ideal brahmanical society is defined by social roles acquired by birth and in a strict hierarchy that is mirrored in practices of precedence (guest and host not eating 'together') or in the chain of leftovers.

### On a socio-anthropological level

On a more general level, the comparative work provides a way to reflect on issues that may be of interest in contexts other than those specifically studied, thus joining current discussions in the study of religions or anthropology. The comparative category or problem becomes the *explicandum*, and the contexts are in the posture of *explicans*. For example, in the present case, situations described in the sources can be used to refine the model of Marcel Mauss,<sup>61</sup> who insists on the role of gifts in the creation of a

network of mutual obligations. Mauss's model can be improved by taking into account a larger number of temporal, spatial or social factors, and, above all, the issue of the asymmetries of power among the actors involved.

Similarly, it is possible to emphasize key anthropological elements in a guest-host relationship, emphasizing their sociological implications. Specific cases (such as greeting and farewell formulae, seating arrangements, precedence, the preparation of food, menu, number of guests, duration of the stay, access to specific domestic spaces) can relate to Erving Goffman's category of 'interaction rituals'.<sup>62</sup> Practices of hospitality appear as mirrors of a socio-religious organization and entail major symbolical consequences – an aspect that can push Goffman's analyses further.

On the same level, the ritualizing process of practices related to hospitality – including rules about conducting formal meals – can contribute to a reassessment of theories such as Norbert Elias's analysis of the 'civilization process'. In particular, examples from Jewish and Indian worlds make a powerful case against any European exceptionalism in this domain.<sup>63</sup>

### On a reflexive level

Finally, firmly grounded in the data, comparison leads to a critical assessment of analytical categories themselves and the way they are defined or constructed: did the study bring elements that prompt one to reconsider classical or standard conceptions in the study of religions? Did the analysis find idiosyncrasies (which?) of a research tradition in one of the compared contexts? Is it possible to propose amendments to the analytical vocabulary, pointing to dimensions that have not received enough attention so far?

In the present case, the traditional association of 'sacrifice' with violence and its need for the ritual creation of social solidarity (seen, for example, in René Girard's work) can be questioned on several bases.<sup>64</sup> Another point for discussion is the non-missionary (and immobile) character often associated with both brahmanical and rabbinic traditions: by contrast, the example of hospitality points to traditions that are highly dynamic and attempt to spread influence through travel and temporary stays away from home. Yet another aspect is the frequent equation of the notions of 'charity' and 'hospitality': these notions were, on the contrary, shown as embedded in very different sets of issues and should, therefore, be carefully distinguished analytically.

This approach attempts to avoid a hasty reification of the compared entities, proceeding (as much as possible) in an inductive way, bottom-up, from the texts to the theory and not the other way around. Not only does the study attempt to grant equal attention to both contexts: it deals with two different historiographical traditions, each of which is studied according to its own logic. In this sense, and even if the present case deals with independent contexts, we can subscribe to the notion of a *histoire à parts égales*,<sup>65</sup> as developed by Romain Bertrand.

However, such a method also has limitations, because we do not have the same amount of historical data for the contextualization of each case, because the topic itself is not equally conceptualized as a stand-alone topic, and because of the complexity of each case taken individually: often, a single document displays contradictory statements, and this should be fully acknowledged before proceeding with a

comparison. It is, therefore, perfectly reasonable to wonder whether this kind of work would not be better achieved in the framework of a collaborative team of scholars, each specialized in a specific field, ready to discuss general and comparative issues with their colleagues. A single scholar has, however, the advantage of better controlling the way his or her work is constructed, contributing to a more balanced handling of each context.

### Comparison as a tool for 'de-provincializing' the study of religions

From here, I would like to conclude with three points related to the possible use of comparison as a tool for 'de-provincializing' the academic study of religions.

1. A first thought is that categories such as 'religion', 'canon', 'myth' and 'sacrifice' have a long history that progressively uprooted them from their original contexts and broadened their scope. As such, using them in a scholarly discourse configures a specific set of data as comparable to other sets that have been similarly named (by the same or by different scholars, past or present). In this sense, even *Religionsgeschichte* (as conceived by J. Wach) is never entirely descriptive, and in the worst case, comparison will implicitly linger in the scholarly interpretations, as analytical vocabulary will be used to re-describe data.<sup>66</sup>
2. Second, it is certainly not possible to replace the analytical vocabulary with a set of 'neutral' categories. As Chidester observed in his study on the circulation of concepts of religion in South Africa (and the same holds true for India),

After reviewing the history of colonial productions and reproductions on contested frontiers, we might happily abandon religion and religions as terms of analysis if we were not, as the result of that very history, struck with them.<sup>67</sup>

Looking at the same argument from the other side, it can be argued that categories such as 'ritual', 'religion', 'myth', 'mysticism', etc., are not hopelessly Eurocentric. The study of religions did not grow out of a purely Christian and European context. Arguably, it also developed by exposition to other cultural contexts, and often recycled the works of non-European elites in so doing. Most historical surveys of the discipline have emphasized the purely European genealogy of the field without paying much attention to the dialogical construction of discourses about religion, at least since the nineteenth century and probably long before.<sup>68</sup>

It is, however, clear that in all of these cases, translations or comparisons – even those that are biased and compromised – introduced semantic dissonances into mainstream discourses about religion. Comparison contributed to building perspectives that were in tension with religious orthodoxies, gradually turning 'religion' into an academic problem and making it increasingly complex.<sup>69</sup>

3. Finally, accepting the possibility (and need) of broadening the horizons of analytical concepts and recognizing an affinity between object and method, a comparative historical work that strives to grant equal attention to its different sources brings new perspectives that speak from different centres, from different



epistemological and historiographical backgrounds. This type of project is similar to attempts to hybridize historiographies,<sup>70</sup> with different contexts for studying religions academically contributing to the pluralizing of theoretical approaches to religion(s).

In the end, the genealogical and analogical modes of comparison remain not only valid but also vital for today's study of religions. On the one hand, the study of historically related phenomena (genealogical approach, 'connected', 'entangled' histories) helps to discern the web of influences and borrowings of which tradition is made, undermining any claim related to its 'purity'. On the other hand, the study of a specific topic through different contexts that are not historically or geographically related (analogical approach) substantiates a theoretical discussion and a critical examination of the analytical vocabulary. In this sense, comparison is at the same time an enterprise that is absolutely necessary to 'de-provincialize' the study of religions, and a highly risky intellectual operation that needs to be carefully constructed and closely controlled.<sup>71</sup>

## Notes

- 1 Müller 1873b.
- 2 Ibid.: 283. Emphasis mine.
- 3 Since its 'results' can easily be used to demonstrate the opposite thesis (such as Holwell's or Voltaire's use of speculations on the correspondences between Indian mythologies and the Bible).
- 4 One of the figures of the Asiatic Society of Calcutta mentioned by Müller is Francis Wilford (1750?-1822), who was convinced that biblical names and stories were appearing in Sanskrit manuscripts before realizing that the texts had been forged by clever pandits.
- 5 Fergusson writes: 'If the two religions [Indian and Scandinavian] come anywhere in contact, it is at their base, for underlying both there existed a strange substratum of Tree and Serpent Worship', quoted by Müller 1873b: 305-6. Fergusson's theory was also informed by a typically colonial view, according to which ancient India owed most of its genius and techniques (in particular architectural) to the Greeks. On Fergusson's colonial undertones, see Cohn 1996: 89-96.
- 6 Müller 1873b: 319.
- 7 Müller 1873a: 15-16. Goethe's formula is: 'Wer fremde Sprachen nicht kennt, weiß nichts von seiner eigenen', Goethe [1833] 2006: 188.
- 8 Müller 1873a: 12.
- 9 For critical views on Müller's own comparative method, see Gladigow 1997 and Masuzawa 2005: 207-56.
- 10 Smith 1990: 36-53. See also Smith 1971 and the distinction between comparison that works on processes of assimilation, diffusion or borrowing, and comparison that is conceived as a hermeneutic device (70-1). This distinction echoes recent debates in historiography concerning the respective roles (and problems) of 'comparative history' and 'entangled history' (or 'connected histories' or *Transfugeschichte*). See here the classical essay of Bloch (1928) and the critical evaluation of Espagne (1994), contrasting with Detienne's polemical essay rehabilitating the role of 'comparative

histories' to fight against nationalist historiographical tendencies, *Comparing the Incomparable* (Detienne [2000] 2008).

- 11 On this point, see Smith 1971: 70, in particular fn 12.
- 12 For details, see Burkert 1992.
- 13 Mintz 1985.
- 14 Subrahmanyam 2001.
- 15 See Whitehouse 2000 and Pysäinen 2001.
- 16 Among many other studies, see King 1999.
- 17 On C. Tiele and comparison, see Borner 2009.
- 18 Saler 1993.
- 19 See the review of Wiebe 1995: 81-2. Our conception of comparison is diametrically opposed to this choice.
- 20 Paden 1996: 7.
- 21 Paden 2013: 98.
- 22 Leach 1966.
- 23 Wiebe 1996.
- 24 Smith 1978.
- 25 Smith 2011: 26-7.
- 26 Smith 1982: xi.
- 27 The following case is a brief summary of my study, Borner 2010.
- 28 Holdrege 1996 and more recently, Holdrege 2010. Among those diverging traits, the following aspects are particularly striking in the present corpus: (1) the presence of elite textual communities that have codified their respective norms in the form of scriptural canons, and that derive their authority precisely from this role; (2) a focus on practice rather than belief, with (among others) a special relation to sacrificial traditions, comprehensive legal systems, complex dietary laws, and regulations concerning purity and impurity; (3) a concern with issues of family, ethnic and cultural integrity, blood lineages, and the intergenerational transmission of traditions: in both contexts, there is a special relation with one language (Sanskrit, Hebrew) and with one specific territory (Āryāvarta and Israel).
- 29 Hospitality is designated by specific terms in both sets of texts: *hakhnasat ha-orevain* or '*akhshanya* in Hebrew/Aramaic and *āthīya* in Sanskrit, along with many derivatives, meaning 'host', 'guest' etc.
- 30 Thus, Neusner 1989: 31.  
Books of an ancient world, one remote from our own, teach us not what happened then but how people who wrote books wanted their contemporaries and continuators to think about what happened. That sort of learning about religion leads us deep into the imagination, concerning society and the social world, of people who wrote a given book and people who valued and preserved that book and put it together with other such books to form a canon of truth: *the scheme of a social world as it should be* (emphasis mine).
- 31 Babylonian Talmud Berakhot 63b. It is a *baraita*. It has a parallel in Song of Songs Rabbah 2.17-2.18.
- 32 The names mentioned are R. Yehuda, R. Nehemyah, R. Me'ir, R. Yose, R. Sim'on b. Yoḥai, R. 'Eli'ezer son of R. Yose the Galilean and R. 'Eli'ezer b. Jacob.
- 33 According to tradition, *tanna* of the end of the second century CE.
- 34 2 Samuel 6, 12.
- 35 Babylonian Talmud Berakhot 63b, trans. Epstein 1978: 402.

- 36 cf. Neusner 1970: 1–5, who notes: '[The rabbi] was Torah, not merely because he lived by it, but because at his best he constituted as compelling an embodiment of the heavenly model, as did a Torah scroll itself' (3, emphasis by the author).
- 37 For example Palestinian Talmud Shabbat 6:9, 8c (about Bar Qappara) or Babylonian Talmud Berakhot 60b–61a (hospitality denied to R. Aqiva when arriving in a village).
- 38 This conception of the rabbinic movement, which differs radically from the ideal image that the rabbis want to give (as the heads of Jewish communities), is pictured by Schwartz 2001: 103 *sqq.* among others.
- 39 See, for example, the list of Josefa Solah 4.1–6 (ed. Zuckerman: 298–9) where actions related to Abraham's hospitality are followed by major consequences for Abraham and his people in the present life, for the future in this world and in an eschatological future (*le'atid lanu*).
- 40 According to tradition, the late third-century CE Palestinian *amora*, disciple of R. Yohanan in Tiberiades.
- 41 According to tradition, the second-century CE *tanna*, a disciple of R. Aqiva and a colleague of Sages of the 'Usha generation.
- 42 Babylonian Talmud Berakhot 10b, trans. Epstein 1978: 58.
- 43 Mishna Demai 2.3, trans Sarason 1982: 79.
- 44 Because the 'am ha-'araš is assumed not to pay attention to contact with impure items.
- 45 Babylonian Talmud Bava Bathra 8a.
- 46 According to the tradition, a disciple of Rabbi Yehuda ha-Nasi, rarely mentioned in rabbinic literature.
- 47 See, for instance, the discussion in Babylonian Talmud Beṣah 21b (is it possible to invite a 'pagani' [nokhri] to a *yom tov* (festival))? cf. Schwartz 2001: 174. Neusner points to this specific example to emphasize the gap between the recommendations of the rabbinic elite and popular practice, which is – in his opinion – particularly wide in the Persian Sassanid context (Neusner 1965–70, vol. 5: 26–9).
- 48 Āpastamba Dharma Sūtra 2.(3).6.4–5, trans. Olivelle 2005: 83.
- 49 Āpastamba Dharma Sūtra 2.(3).7.4, trans Olivelle 2000: 85 (see also Atharva Veda 9.6.40–44). All sacrifices mentioned here are related to soma pressings and are derived from the sacrifice of *agnistoma* – a major sacrifice performed for Agni, requiring the presence of sixteen priests, lasting five days and involving three soma pressings. Even if the correspondences are not all obvious, the text proceeds in an increasing order: ghee is better than milk, honey is better than ghee, and meat – associated with the particularly long and costly *dvadaśāha* sacrifice – is better than honey.
- 50 Yaśiṣṭha Dharma Sūtra 8.6, trans Olivelle 2000: 383.
- 51 Mānava Dharma Śāstra 3.1.10; Mānava Dharma Śāstra 3.1.12, trans Olivelle 2005: 114.
- 52 On hierarchies and lefovers, see Malamoud 1989: 20.
- 53 Mānava Dharma Śāstra 4.29–30, trans Olivelle 2005: 125.
- 54 Conclusions reached at this level are not far from the conception of comparison expressed by B. Lincoln in his recent 'theses on comparison' (Lincoln 2012: 123). Lincoln gives a concrete example and compares a scene from a Persian myth (the *Greater Bundahīšn*) with a passage from an Anglo-Saxon epic (*Beowulf*). Lincoln discerns similar argumentative schemes that reflect a similar intention to influence human behaviours by relating them to a cosmological framework.

- 55 The scholar of rabbinic Judaism, Catherine Hezser, has recently analysed the role of 'personal alliance networks' and emphasized the importance of travels (and hence temporary stays) for the development of the rabbinic movement. See Hezser 1997, 2011.
- 56 On the defensive posture perceivable in most brahmanical normative texts, see, for example, Olivelle 2005: 39 ('Reading the *MDh* one cannot fail to see and to feel the intensity and urgency with which the author defends Brahmanical privilege', and before him Meyer 1927).
- 57 On this concept, cf. Stock 1983: 90–1, who defines a textual community as a 'relatively small group of literati whose fellowship and communal life is based not on ethnic heritage or doctrinal confession, but on a shared devotion to – perhaps an obsession with – an authoritative text or set of texts.'
- 58 On this aspect, see Lubin 2002.
- 59 Lincoln 2012: 129.
- 60 cf. Lubin 2002: 450.
- 61 Mauss 1985.
- 62 Goffman 1967.
- 63 cf. the criticism expressed by Goody 2007: 154–79 towards Norbert Elias's 'absolutist European characterization of the 'civilizing process'. A similar observation can be made in reference to a Mediterranean specificity of 'societies of honor and shame', as stated in Pitt-Rivers 1997.
- 64 For a similar reassessment, developed from comparison between Vedic and Jewish sacrificial practices, see McClymond 2007.
- 65 Bertrand 2011.
- 66 Thus, Lincoln 2012: 121: 'The only alternatives [to comparison] are (a) a discourse whose generalizations remain intuitive, unreflective, and commonsensical, that is without basis, rigor, or merit; and (b) a parochialism that dares speak nothing beyond the petty and the particular.'
- 67 Chidester 1996: 259.
- 68 See, for example, Kippenberg 1997.
- 69 On the semantic evolution of 'religion', see, for example, Smith 1998.
- 70 The expression is borrowed from Rother 1995: 52.
- 71 A few recent examples that are fully aware of the 'classical' evils of comparison and proceed as inductively as possible include Holdrege 1996; McClymond 2007; Freiberger 2009 and Pollock (2009).

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## Part Two

# Phenomenology and the Foundations of Comparison