

## SUMMARY OF THE DISCUSSION

BY

ANNEMARIE SCHIMMEL

In the discussion which followed the introducing remarks of Professor Bleeker on the aim of his paper, Professor Werblowsky submitted a paper which contains the “basic minimum conditions for the study of the history of religions”, as he put it. A fairly great number of scholars, not belonging to any ideological bloc but coming from different fields of research, had associated themselves with the main tenor of its contents. It runs as follows:

“The Secretary General has submitted to the General Assembly a paper entitled “The future task of the History of Religions” in which he explores the peculiar *Problematik* of our discipline at the present moment. Professor Bleeker has made it clear that his paper does not want to formulate a “platform” for the IAHR; it wants to present his reflections on some of our problems and to initiate discussion. He has therefore kindly asked a number of his friends and colleagues to study his paper and use it as a starting point for airing their views and exchanging opinions in this Assembly. In obedience to Professor Bleeker’s wish I want to catch the ball which he has thrown at us, and I want to do so by reading a brief statement. This statement — and I wish to make this clear with the greatest possible emphasis — is not intended as a full or even sufficient systematic definition of the nature and principles of our discipline. It is merely a reaction to certain problems raised by Professor Bleeker’s paper and to some expressions found in it. I certainly do not wish to present the platform, creed or manifest of any particular school, but merely to read a brief statement of what, to many of us in the IAHR, appear to be the *basic minimum presuppositions* for the pursuit of our studies. A number of scholars have signified their readiness to be associated with the general tenor of this statement, although they might not strictly agree with every word in it. On hearing the list of their names, indicative not only of a great variety of religious and agnostic denominations and persuasions,

but also—and this is far more to the point—of profound differences in approach, method and subject-matter, you will realize that this list does not represent an ideological block but rather a general tendency among many of us to consider certain basic assumptions as prerequisites for the scientific study of religions.

The names are: Abel (Bruxelles), Brandon (Manchester), Brelich (Rome), Brezzi (Rome), Duchesne-Guillemain (Liège), Eliade (Chicago), Goodenough (Yale), Hidding (Leiden), Hoffmann (München), Kishimoto (Tokyo), Kitagawa (Chicago), Lanternari (Rome), Long (Chicago), Pincherle (Rome), Simon (Strasbourg), Werblowsky (Jerusalem), Zaehner (Oxford).

And now the statement itself:

1. Although the *religionswissenschaftliche* method is undoubtedly a Western creation, the qualification of the diametrically opposed methods of studying religions as “occidental” and “oriental” respectively is—to say the least—misleading. There are Religionswissenschaftler in the East as there are “intuitionists” in the West. The understanding (*Verstehen*) of structures and configurations, *Ganzheitsschau* and even *Wesensschau* have for long formed a major part or—at least—a major problem of the Humanities. It is therefore an overstatement to say that the East wants to grasp the whole, whilst Western scholarship is concerned with philological, archeological, etc. detail and historical segments only. “Comparative Religion” is a well-recognized scientific discipline whose methodology may still be in great need of further elaboration, but whose aim is clearly a better understanding of the nature of the variety and historic individuality of religions, whilst remaining constantly alert to the possibility of *scientifically legitimate* generalisations concerning the nature and function of religion.
2. *Religionswissenschaft* understands itself as a branch of the Humanities. It is an anthropological discipline, studying the religious phenomenon as a creation, feature and aspect of human culture. The common ground on which students of religion *qua* students of religion meet is the realization that the awareness of the numinous or the experience of transcendence (where these happen to exist in religions) are—whatever else they may be—undoubtedly empirical facts of human existence and history, to be studied like all human facts, by the appropriate methods. Thus also the value-systems of

the various religions, forming an essential part of the factual, empirical phenomenon, are legitimate objects of our studies. On the other hand the discussion of the absolute value of religion is excluded by definition, although it may have its legitimate place in other, completely independent disciplines such as e.g. theology and philosophy of religion.

3. The statement that "the value of religious phenomena can be understood only if we keep in mind that religion is ultimately a realization of a transcendent truth" is to be rejected as part of the foundations of *Religionswissenschaft*. The facts and analyses of *Religionswissenschaft* may become the raw material for a *theologia naturalis* or for any other philosophical or religious system. But this is already outside the terms of reference of *Religionswissenschaft* and therefore no longer the concern of the student of religion.
4. The study of religions need not seek for justification outside itself so long as it remains embedded in a culture pattern that allows for every quest of historical truth as its own *raison d'être*. Whatever the subsequent use made by the individual scholar of his special knowledge, and whatever the analysable sociological function of scientific activity in any specific cultural and historical situation, the *ethos* of our studies is in themselves.
5. There may or may not be room for organizations in which students of religion join with others in order to contribute their share towards the promotion of certain ideals—national, international, political, social, spiritual and otherwise. But this is a matter of individual ideology and commitment, and must under no circumstance be allowed to influence or colour the character of the IAHR."

Most of the scholars who partook in the following discussion agreed that the fundamental basis shown by Werblowsky's paper should be accepted as ground of our research, but that there may be some difficulties as to the nuances of methodological questions. The necessary objectivity of historical research and its scientific basis was stressed by Professor E. O. James who also agreed with Professor Bleeker on the fact that the study of ancient religions must form an important branch of the scholarly work to be done, because it seems impossible to understand the higher living religions without knowing their background and their home sphere.

Whereas almost all scholars agreed that there are no differences between East and West regarding the historical and scholarly method, the Indian participant of the discussion turned to the fact that there be no difference between oriental and occidental view in “the search after the absolute truth which is going on since the eldest times of humanity; in this innate search of the human soul and spirit only a little difference of stress exists between both sides”. However, the different approach of Eastern and Western mind to the problems showed itself in the conclusion Swami Bon Maharaj reached: namely, that it be the most important question in East and West to find out by historical research how religion can help mankind in their practical life.

Professor H. Kishimoto, agreeing in the general lines with Werblowsky’s paper, would, however, prefer a term more comprehensive than “history of religions”, e.g. that what is called *Religionswissenschaft* and of which the history of religion is only one part; it seemed to him that the limitation of the term might be a hindrance to the development of the activities of the IAHR which covers all the different fields of research. On the other hand, Professor E. Ehnmark holds that “the good old history of religions is an unshakable rock” and laid stress upon the importance of a careful analysis of the fundamental conceptions (*Grundbegriffe*) which are used in *Religionswissenschaft* — like the idea of God, or that of sin, as it had been done in papers read during the congress (by A. Brelich and E. des Places). The question is to know how the respective terms and notions are used in their context, and to be most careful in order not to compare items which essentially should not be compared; pure historical and philological research must form the basis of every study in the field of history of religions. The question whether a living religion might be understood better by an outsider than by a person who lives inside that faith was answered in the negative by Professor Ludin Jansen according to whose opinion a person who is brought up in a certain religion, even without understanding it in a scientific sense, may have a more genuine feeling for its innermost values and its proper character. Professor Pincherle held that in the beginning there is no special aim in scientific research but that its use appears later — the same should be true for the study of history or phenomenology of religion.

Opposing the statement of Werblowsky that religion should be studied in the same way as any other science, Professor H. D. Lewis emphasised that religion has to be studied — though in an objective

way — from another point of view; good sense and discrimination which are compatible with objective study but still give the study another depth are requested. The history of religions should rather — instead of limiting the scope of research — associate itself more closely with the philosophy or religion; an attitude which was shared by Dastur Dr. F. Bode who defined the purpose of our studies as “to go into the very deep spirit of religions”. Professor J. W. Hauer, too, emphasized the fact that the history of religions has to do with a deeper layer of facts, with quite another level and dimension of consciousness, than the other sciences. He agreed with the tenor of Professor Bleeker’s paper in general but regarded as somewhat dangerous the idea that a group of scholars should be led to accept a certain way of research and to exclude the other ways. Every science, he continued, has a special importance and meaning for life (*Lebenssinn*); but it is not the duty of a science to show people the right way; the only success which can be hoped for is that people may be led by the results of our scholarly work towards truth because we have inquired and entered the very depth of our subject. Questions of methodology should be discussed in smaller circles of specialists.

After Professor Sung Bum Yun had stressed again the unity of scientific methods in East and West, the neutralization of the study of religions, and its complete objectivity, Professor Bleeker summarized the results of the meeting which was, as he explained, only a starting point for further discussions. According to him, even here the differences of approach between Eastern and Western scholars who may use exactly the same scientific methods, have come to light very clearly. In order to find out what religion is, one has to study the extinct religions, because in living religions we all are more or less involved. A neat historical examination can set clear some more of the character of religion. The point of difference between himself and Werblowsky, Professor Bleeker continued, is this problem: science can never tell about revelation. But religious people are and have been always convinced that they are in touch with a higher reality. This must be taken into consideration. However, we should make a clear distinction between our scientific work and Ecumenical movement or World Congress of Faiths—we are only a congress for the scientific study of the history of religions. It is our duty to spread our light to people who do not know properly what religion is. But our task is not conversion to faith whatsoever, but simply enlightening.