

# Internationalisation of the Study of Religion and Its Methodological Challenges

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## Abstract

*This paper discusses internationalisation of the study of religion after the mid-twentieth century and some methodological implications of this development. It is shown that when the International Association for the History of Religions (IAHR) was established in 1950 under the auspices of UNESCO to collaborate between scholars from different parts of the world, some non-Western scholars raised questions about the exact nature and objectives of the study of religion. The then protagonists of IAHR quickly responded to these questions by proclaiming “the basic minimum conditions” for academic study of religion, which did not leave much space for diversity of cultural perspectives in the field. Then the paper shows, through a brief historical survey of relevant materials, how the increased interaction between scholars from different cultures of the world thenceforth exposed the Eurocentric tenor of this discipline, and by implication its assumed methodological universality also came under question. It is concluded that, in spite of the widespread recognition of methodological contingencies afforded by different cultural perspectives and regional contexts, scholars are still divided on how various knowledge traditions of the world can be accommodated in the discipline without succumbing to explicit biases or apologetics.*

## Keywords

religious studies, Eurocentrism, internationalisation, globalisation, methodology, perspectives.

## Introduction

The modern discipline of academic study of religion emerged in a particular social and historical context. The development took place in the second half of the nineteenth century in Western Europe and then gradually proliferated in

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rest of the Europe and North America. The idea was to study religion scientifically. However, as religion is a very complex, multidimensional, and variegated human phenomenon and apparent religious rites, rituals, myths, and symbols are often imbued with deeper subjective and cultural-specific meanings, subjecting it to a systematic scientific inquiry or a set methodological procedure is but a formidable challenge. In other words, capturing and decoding meanings of diverse and multilayered religious symbols “in conceptual formulae that will be understandable and acceptable to all concerned”<sup>1</sup> is really a difficult task. Thus, right from its inception the academic study of religion has been characterised by methodological wrangling and the ensuing polarisation. Ever since, the enterprise has also encountered some turning points and passed through several phases. One of such turning points was the attempt to internationalise this discipline around the mid-twentieth with establishment of the International Association for the History of Religion (IAHR). The development, however, entailed a new set of methodological and theoretical tensions, which is the subject of this paper.

### Historical Background

At the time of its inception in the latter half of the nineteenth century, the discipline was known with the nomenclature of *Religionswissenschaft*—science of religion—and it heavily relied on Darwinism, which meant a linear concept of evolution of human culture and civilisation.<sup>2</sup> To put it succinctly, just as humans themselves have evolved biologically, human civilisation and culture have also evolved from primitive to the more advanced and complex forms. In this scheme, religion was also seen as a part of human culture and, therefore, a product of cultural evolution. Comparative method was deemed suitable to find out the evolutionary stages of religion and to unearth most primitive forms of religion in order to discover the origins of religion.

The study of religion itself was seen in terms of successive phases. Hence, in the beginning of the twentieth century Louis Henry Jordan wrote that the science of religion was divided into three subfields: (1) the history of religions, (2) comparative religion, (3) and the philosophy of religion. In working out this taxonomy, he was following an evolutionary model according to which all sciences passed through three successive stages: accumulation of the facts, comparison and classification of the facts, and finally theoretical and

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<sup>1</sup> W. Richard Comstock, *The Study of Religion and Primitive Religions* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 4.

<sup>2</sup> See Eric J. Sharp, *Comparative Religion: A History* (London: Duckworth, 2003), 25–26.

metaphysical stage when general principles are derived from the obtained facts.<sup>3</sup>

By the early decades of the twentieth century, the quest for origin of religion had proved to be a dead-end project and, therefore, was abandoned by majority of the scholars. According to Christoph Schwöbel (b. 1955), the presupposition that all religions make up one evolutionary process during the first phase underlined the implicit presupposition that Christianity, with its particular understanding of Godhead, was the most developed form of religion.<sup>4</sup> Scholars like Nathan Söderblom (d. 1931), Rudolf Otto (d. 1937), and Joachim Wach (d. 1955) realised that the concept of God did not provide the unity of the diverse world of religions; hence, alternative categories like “holiness,” “numinous,” and “sacred” were presented as pertaining to the true core of religion. Thus, the idea of unity of religious phenomena seen in the evolutionary scheme and the unitary grasp of the historical method was abandoned and located in the unity of religious experience of the “holy.”<sup>5</sup> The approach of this group of scholars is known as phenomenology of religion.

Phenomenologists of religion saw religion as a unique and self-generating—*Sui Generis*—phenomenon, which exists simply because man is a religious being—*homo religiosus*. According to this view, the apparent diversity of religious phenomena has an essence, which can be discovered by making use of the phenomenological method centred on human experience. Hence, for them the study of religion was an independent discipline with its own unique method. However, not everyone in the field was happy with the phenomenology of religion. A number of scholars were inclined to see religion through the lenses of social, cultural, and historical factors alone and thus it was to be understood through various social scientific methods. In other words, social scientific approaches were generally reductionist in trying to explain religion with reference to non-religious factors. In short, the study of religion entered into a phase of tussle between thematic and essentialist phenomenology of religion on the one hand and social scientific and historical approaches to the study of religion, on the other. Moreover, with the rise of functionalism in the social sciences, which focused on functions instead of beliefs, functionalism and phenomenology of religion became two rival camps during that phase.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Louis Henry Jordan, *Comparative Religion: Its Genesis and Growth* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1986), 9–10, 21–22.

<sup>4</sup> Christoph Schwöbel, “The History of Religions and the Study of Religions: A Response to Hans Kippenberg,” in *The Future of the Study of Religion: Proceedings of Congress 2000*, ed. Slavica Jakelić and Lori Pearson (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 66–67.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 67–68.

<sup>6</sup> See Hans G. Kippenberg, “The Study of Religions in the 20th Century” in *The Future of the*

In spite of the above described methodological rifts, until the mid-twentieth century the academic study of religion remained a Western project, more specifically that of the Scandinavian and Western European scholars. There was hardly any voice from non-Western cultures in this field.

### Internationalisation of the Discipline and New Challenges

Around the mid-twentieth century, important political developments took place like World War II and the subsequent formation of the United Nations Organization (UNO), which affected the whole world significantly. Under the auspices of UNO, a number of political, social, cultural, legal, fiscal, and security-related bodies were established which envisioned the whole world as domain of their activities. Against this backdrop, in 1950 the International Association for the History of Religions (IAHR)<sup>7</sup> was established as a global forum for the academicians engaged in the study of religion. In a way, the emergence of IAHR signified the end of what Jacques Waardenburg (d. 2015) calls “classical period” of the academic study of religion.

Organisationally, IAHR was established under the UNESCO’s scholarly body named *International Council for Philosophy and Humanistic Studies* (CIPSH), which was founded in January 1949, in Brussels. The constitution of CIPSH envisages that “a detailed comparative study of civilizations will show the wealth and dignity of each national culture and in consequence, its right to universal respect.”<sup>8</sup> Similarly, the constitutionally stated aim of IAHR is “to promote the study of history of religions through the international collaboration of all those whose scientific interests lie in this field.”<sup>9</sup> Thus, it is clear that with IAHR the academic study of religion, which was once a project of Western scholars exclusively, notwithstanding all of their methodological agreements and disagreements, became an international affair, at least in principle.

Though IAHR was mainly a venture of the European scholars and thus carried Eurocentric and “orientalist” tenor, it also signified a desire of these scholars to make the study of religion more truly international and global.<sup>10</sup>

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*Study of Religion: Proceedings of Congress 2000*, ed. Slavica Jakelić and Lori Pearson (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 56.

<sup>7</sup> It was originally named as the International Association for the Study of History of Religions (I.A.S.H.R.).

<sup>8</sup> The International Council for Philosophy and Human Sciences, “Constitution of CIPSH,” accessed January 20, 2019, <http://www.cipsh.net/web/channel-9.htm>.

<sup>9</sup> C. J. Bleeker, “Bulletin: The International Association for the Study of History of Religions (I.A.S.H.R.),” *Numen* 1, no. 1 (1954): 87.

<sup>10</sup> Tim Jensen, “The EASR within (the World Scenario of) the IAHR,” in *NVMEN: The Academic Study of Religion, and the IAHR; Past, Present and Prospects*, ed. Tim Jensen and Armin

However, it seems that IAHR lacked a well-thought-out model for participation of non-Western scholars or meaningful representation of the cultural heritage of different civilisations from around the world. This became especially evident in 1958, when IAHR convened its first Congress out of Europe, in Tokyo. Programme of the congress also included a UNESCO sponsored symposium titled “Religion and Thought in the Orient and Occident.” During the proceedings of this congress, some scholars from the eastern societies raised questions about the very foundations of the modern academic study of religion. One of their concerns was that such type of study did not address the questions of truth and ultimate value of religion.<sup>11</sup> For majority of European and North American scholars, those views appeared to be poles apart from their cherished notions of objectivity, neutrality, and scientific inquiry. The then veterans of IAHR ascribed the concerns of Eastern scholars to a misapprehension about the subject, lack of familiarity with European scholarship, and partial secularisation of the non-Western societies.<sup>12</sup> Zwi Werblowsky remarked that East “could not, in its approach to humanistic studies, make up for the absence, as an imminent growth, of the decisive cultural phenomenon known in European history as the ‘Enlightenment.’”<sup>13</sup> Thus, it can be viewed that the opinions of Eastern scholars expressed at the Tokyo Congress did not find appreciative ears at that time, but they exposed, to some extent, the Western cultural baggage of the modern academic study of religion.

As hinted at above, the discipline of religious studies carried the cultural baggage of Western modernity. However, apparently the pioneers of the discipline had a positivistic perception of religious data and a universalistic notion of method to handle it, considered not to be contingent on cultural differences. To put it differently, in spite of the internal theoretical and methodological rifts, the academic study of religion was perceived as based on a universal scientific method. Such conceptualisation of the discipline became manifest when five “basic minimum conditions for the study of history of religions” were proclaimed by IAHR at its Congress 1960, which was held in Marburg, Germany. It is worth mentioning here that IAHR had, and continues to have, a tradition of quintennial congresses. Therefore, convening of the next congress, only after two years that time, apparently signified some immediate concern that the then veterans of IAHR had in their minds, which

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Geertz (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 197.

<sup>11</sup> Reinhard Pummer, “Religionswissenschaft or Religiology?” *Numen* 19, nos. 2–3 (1972): 97.

<sup>12</sup> R. J. Zwi Werblowsky, “Marburg and After,” *Numen* 7, no. 1 (1961): 219.

<sup>13</sup> Werblowsky, “Bulletin: The 9th International Congress for the History of Religions, Tokyo, 1958,” *Numen* 5, no. 3 (1958): 234.

they expressed in five points. The statement of these basic presuppositions clarified that religion was to be studied as a matter of human culture, that the issue of transcendental reality of religion was out of the purview of the academic study of religion, and that any attempt to establish distinction between Eastern and Western approaches to the study of religion was misleading. Let us consider important points stated in the five principles promulgated at that occasion verbatim:

1. Although the *religionswissenschaftliche* method is undoubtedly a Western creation, the qualification of the diametrically opposed method of studying religions as “occidental” and “oriental” respectively is—to say the least—misleading. . . . “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 religion, 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 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*.
4. The study of religions need not seek for justification outside itself so long as it remains embedded in a cultural pattern that allows for every quest of historical truth as its own *raison d’être*.
5. . . . The promotion of certain ideals—national, international, political, social, spiritual and otherwise . . . must under no circumstance be allowed to influence or colour the character of the IAHR.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Annemarie Schimmel, “Summary of the Discussion,” *Numen* 7, no. 2 (1960): 236–37.

These points were agreed upon as the basic minimum presuppositions for the pursuit of academic study of religion by the following important scholars, among others: Samuel George Frederick Brandon (1907–1971) from Manchester, Angelo Brelich (1913–1977) from Rome, Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin (1910–2012) from Liege, Mercia Eliade (1907–1986) from Chicago, Erwin R. Goodenough (1893–1965) from Yale, Klaas Albert Hendrik Hidding (1902–1986) from Leiden, Hideo Kishimoto (1903–1964) from Tokyo, Joseph Kitagawa (1915–1992) from Chicago, Zwi Werblowsky (1924–2015) from Jerusalem, and Robert C. Zaehner (1913–1974) from Oxford.<sup>15</sup> Though these scholars had different methodological tendencies, they all came from Europe and North America with the exception of Werblowsky and Kishimoto, both of whom were associated with the Western academia though.

The content and context of these statements make it discernible how universal and binding the so-called scientific method was perceived until 1960. However, the statements do not make quite clear what exactly the proclaimed *wissenschaftliches* method is. Such perception of a universally applicable scientific method implicitly denies the existence, and excludes the possibility, of parallel scholarly traditions in different civilisations of the world. It can also be noted that the IAHR's principles try to establish disciplinary identity of the scholarly study of religion over against the other forms of study about religions such as theology and philosophy of religion.

However, in the subsequent decades, the idealised and universalised view of a universal scientific method for the study of religion came under attack from different scholarly quarters. The researchers not only began to question the theories and methods, but also their epistemological foundations. Gradually, people started realising that methodology can turn from tool to trap if allegedly impartial methods cover up the vested interests and prejudices of the scholars.<sup>16</sup> The critical voices gradually established the fact that under the pretext of the neutrality and objectivity voices from various local cultures and scholarly traditions from around the globe cannot and should not be silenced.

One of the main reasons of this growing awareness has been globalisation, which “rules out isolated and privileged pockets of knowledge, and makes all forms of inquiry interactive. Traditional patterns of hierarchy and knowledge are challenged, and conventional forms of training, discipline, and scholarship

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 236.

<sup>16</sup> See Rita M. Gross, “Methodology: Tool or Trap? Comments from a Feminist Perspective,” in *How to do Comparative Religion? Three Ways, Many Goals*, ed. René Gothóni (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2005), 154.

cannot be taken for granted.”<sup>17</sup> The question of indigenous scholarly traditions, multiple modernities, and alternative cultural contexts from around the globe started increasingly claiming the attention of scholars. Actually, it was globalisation, which led internationalisation of the discipline through the establishment of IAHR in the first place. Let us substantiate this view of the theoretical shift with some relevant materials.

### Gradual Recognition of Different Cultural Perspectives and Regional Contexts

A cursory glance at the representative literature, which appeared from the mid-twentieth century onwards, especially proceedings of conferences and congresses convened under the banner of IAHR itself, shows how different cultural, regional, and institutional contexts and theoretical perspectives have been gradually pressing on the study of religion. Of especial importance, here is the sequel on approaches to the study of religion, which started in 1971 as a part of the series of books under the heading of *Religion and Reason* edited by Jacques Waardenburg. The sequel comprises three extensive chronicles of approaches to the study of religion, each comprising two volumes: *Classical Approaches to the Study of Religion*<sup>18</sup> covering developments from 1870s to 1945, *Contemporary Approaches to the Study of Religion*<sup>19</sup> from 1945 to early 1980s, and the *New Approaches to the Study of Religion*<sup>20</sup> more than two decades from 1980 onwards.

In 1971, Jacques Waardenburg admits in *Classical Approaches to the Study of Religion*,

The results of scholar’s work in the field of religion depend . . . also on his notion of religion and the way in which he has arrived at this notion. And here not only his own thought and experience but also the ideas on religion current in his time and environment are important factors in this conceptualization of religion, which is affected equally by the results of his scholarly research.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Bryan S. Turner, “Globalization and the Future of Study of Religion,” in *The Future of the Study of Religion: Proceedings of Congress 2000*, ed. Slavica Jakelić and Lori Pearson (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 134.

<sup>18</sup> Jacques Waardenburg, ed., *Classical Approaches to the Study of Religion: Aims, Methods and Theories of Research*, 2 vols. (The Hague: Mouton, 1973).

<sup>19</sup> Frank Whaling, ed., *Contemporary Approaches to the Study of Religion*, 2 vols. (Berlin: Mouton Publishers, 1983).

<sup>20</sup> Armin W. Geertz, Peter Antes, and Randi R. Warne, eds., *New Approaches to the Study of Religion*, 2 vols. (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 2004).

<sup>21</sup> Waardenburg, *Classical Approaches to the Study of Religion*, 1:4.



The statement sounds like a rigorous argument for a reciprocal view of the context of the religious situation and the perspective of the scholar, but Waardenburg aimed at a less substantial conclusion, that is, understanding a scholars' work hangs on understanding his methodology.<sup>22</sup> However, later on in the preface of 1999 paperback edition of his book he recognises,

There is now room for new approaches. . . . They may also become intercultural, in particular as far as the study of still living religions is concerned. That is to say, researchers with the background not only of different scholarly approaches but also of different social, cultural and spiritual traditions may work together.<sup>23</sup>

What Waardenburg was suggesting in his new preface, Frank Whaling (b. 1934) had already taken care of in his *Contemporary Approaches*, which appeared about one decade after Waardenburg's original work. According to Whaling, one of the differences between what Waardenburg called the classical approaches and the then contemporary approaches lied in the *implications of the Western nature of much religious research*. He asks questions like:

To what extent has this pre-1945 attitude of often unconscious superiority been superseded in the contemporary situation? To what extent have western scholars of religion subsumed the whole spiritual creation of mankind under one interpretation of religion and then absolutized it? To what degree, in spite of the concern for *epoché* and *Einfühlung* fostered by the phenomenological approach, do western scholars feel that it is they who must research and interpret the religion of others for these latter? Can and should scholars from other cultures study western religions in the West, can and should non-western scholars study western and non-western texts together, can and should western anthropologists interpolates the views of the peoples of primal tribes into their academic investigations? One suspects that we are only just beginning to reflect seriously upon these matters.<sup>24</sup>

In his own written chapter "The Study of Religion in a Global Context," he propounds the idea that scholars from Western and non-Western cultures should join hands to authentically generate and convey mutually reliable knowledge of world's religions. The first step to this end, for him, is that other cultural and religious traditions should free themselves from Western stereotypes. The next step is to reconceptualise the universal human solidarity underlying the plurality of religions. In the past, Western assumptions

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 1:xvi.

<sup>24</sup> Whaling, *Contemporary Approaches to the Study of Religion*, 1:12.

enforced global uniformity. In the contemporary scenario, the same needs to be cross-culturally conceived.<sup>25</sup>

Whaling acknowledges that the impact of Western culture upon religious studies is a far more intricate issue to be dealt with in a limited space<sup>26</sup> and it demands for a continuous task of re-conceptualising through interdisciplinary and inter religious teamwork.<sup>27</sup> In keeping with this view, he carries out a survey of the work of six non-Western scholars to the academic study of religion and reflects on the theoretical implications of their contributions. He argues that their work differs from historically-oriented scholarship on academic and cultural grounds rather than on colonial basis, contrary to what Edward Said's thesis might have suggested.<sup>28</sup>

Another difference Whaling mentions under the heading of *Greater involvement of Marxism, inter religious dialogue and non-western scholarship*, where he points out a greater awareness of role of the ideologies in the enterprise of study of religion. By using the term "ideology" loosely, Whaling means "the immense interest which scholars from independent countries take in their religious and cultural tradition, which leads to rediscovery in terms of their own culture of their own religious heritage, but also to scholarly selections and evaluation which can be explained by reference to the present-day spiritual, social, and psychological needs of the traditions concerned."<sup>29</sup> Then he connects how these new arenas are pushing ahead the question of function of the religious studies as an ideology in itself or ideology critique.<sup>30</sup>

Later on, two edited volumes namely *New Approaches to the Study of Religion* include chapters like "A Survey of New Approaches to the Study of Religion in India,"<sup>31</sup> "The Study of Religion and Social Crises: Arab-Islamic Discourse in Late Twentieth Century,"<sup>32</sup> and "The Study of Religion, the History of Religions and Islamic Studies in Turkey: Approaches from "Phenomenological Theology" to Contextualism."<sup>33</sup> Singling out a region

<sup>25</sup> Whaling, "The Study of Religion in a Global Context," in *Theory and Method in Religious Studies*, ed. Frank Whaling (Berlin: Mouton, 1995), 230.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 231.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 243.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 230.

<sup>29</sup> Whaling, *Contemporary Approaches to the Study of Religion*, 1:12–13.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:13.

<sup>31</sup> Pratap Kumar, "A Survey of New Approaches to the Study of Religion in India," in *New Approaches to the Study of Religion*, ed. Armin W. Geertz, Peter Antes, and Randi R. Warne (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 2004), 1:127–45.

<sup>32</sup> Abdulkader Tayob, "The Study of Religion and Social Crises: Arab-Islamic Discourse in Late Twentieth Century," in *New Approaches to the Study of Religion*, ed. Armin W. Geertz, Peter Antes, and Randi R. Warne (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 2004), 1:101–26.

<sup>33</sup> Bülent Şenay, "The Study of Religion, the History of Religions and Islamic Studies in Turkey:

clearly underscores awareness that the study of religions is substantially determined by socio-political realities of that particular region. Over and above this, for the first time this part of the series gives voice to scholars from different cultural backgrounds and let them present their specific perspectives on how the study of religion is flourishing in their parts of the world or the way they view it should be. The above-mentioned three chapters were contributed by scholars from the respective traditions.

This brief overview of the above-discussed sequel of three voluminous books on approaches to the study of religion exposes the Eurocentric nature of the approaches before the World War II. At the same time, it also indicates a rising recognition of different cultural contexts after 1970s according to the following timeline. By the early 1970s, though there has been some dim consciousness of cultural contingencies of the scholarly methodologies, somehow the universality and absoluteness of the scientific method in the study of religion continued to be taken for granted. By the early 1980s and onwards, the works of non-Western scholars began to assert their existence and the fact pressed itself that study of religion in different parts of the world must be looked at in view of the specific historical, political, and cultural situations of a region and that this could also be done by scholars from different cultural backgrounds.

Apart from the above-mentioned sequel on approaches to the study of religion, the proceedings of different regular quintennial congresses and other occasional conferences of IAHR since 1980s too show a similar line of development. For instance, selected proceedings of the sixteenth congress of the International Association for the History of Religions, held in Rome, in 1990, were published as *The Notion of "Religion" in Comparative Research*. They presented a comparative perspective on the very notion of religion from the perspectives of different religious cultures of the world.<sup>34</sup> It may be noted that until the mid-20th century the notion of religion itself was taken for granted and seldom questioned, as was the case with the method to study it.

The seventeenth international congress of IAHR was held in Mexico City, in 1995. A volume of its adjunct proceedings edited by Armin W. Geertz and Russel T. McCutcheon specifically focused on different perspectives on the study of religion. In this volume, four basic characteristics of the enterprise of study of religion are delineated as follows: composite field, methodological

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Approaches from "Phenomenological Theology" to Contextualism," in *New Approaches to the Study of Religion*, ed. Armin W. Geertz, Peter Antes, and Randi R. Warne (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 2004), 1:63–100.

<sup>34</sup> Ugo Bianchi, Fabio Mora, and Lorenzo Bianchi, eds., *The Notion of "Religion" in Comparative Research* (Rome: L'Erma di Bretschneider, 1994).

pluralism, local institutional and cultural traditions, and epistemological tensions.<sup>35</sup> These characteristics imply, in other words, that far from being a coherent discipline with a distinctive methodology of its own, the study of religion is a composite field with multiple methodologies, cultural and institutional contexts, and most importantly a variety of competing epistemological assumptions behind the plurality of methods.

Armin W. Geertz's own contribution entitled "Global Perspectives on Methodology in the Study of Religion"<sup>36</sup> in this volume deserves special mention, which later on also appeared as an independent research paper.<sup>37</sup> According to him, in the wake of what can be called the post-modern challenge, students of religion are faced with the methodological difficulties in the study of living cultures, especially the cultures that have been subject to colonialism, because of the "issues of orientalism, the construction of the exotic, the representation or misrepresentation of other cultures, the politics of science, and feminist criticism."<sup>38</sup> One can surmise that these critical perspectives mainly boil down to the role of power structures in construction of intercultural knowledge.

Around the same years, two special conferences focused on the study of religion in particular regional and ideological contexts. The first special conference was held in Harare, in 1992, and it focused on the study of religion in African context. Its proceedings appeared as *The Study of Religions in Africa: Past, Present and Prospect*.<sup>39</sup> The second special conference was held in Brno, in 1999, and its proceedings appeared in a volume titled *The Academic Study of Religion during the Cold War: East and West*, which especially dealt with the state of art in the societies under the sway of communist ideology.<sup>40</sup> Similarly, a session in the eighteenth congress of IAHR held in 2000, in Durban, was named "Comparativism then and now: Stocktaking and critical issues in the

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<sup>35</sup> Armin W. Geertz and Russell T. McCutcheon, eds., *Perspectives on Method and Theory in the Study of Religions: Adjunct Proceedings of the XVIIth Congress of the International Association for the History of Religions, Mexico City, 1995* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 4.

<sup>36</sup> Armin W. Geertz, "Global Perspectives on Methodology in the Study of Religion," in *Perspectives on Method and Theory in the Study of Religions: Adjunct Proceedings of the XVIIth Congress of the International Association for the History of Religions, Mexico City, 1995*, ed. Armin W. Geertz and Russell T. McCutcheon (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 49–73.

<sup>37</sup> Armin W. Geertz, "Global Perspectives on Methodology in the Study of Religion," *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 12, nos. 1–4 (2000): 49–73.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>39</sup> Jan Platvoet, James Cox, and Jacob Olupona, eds., *The Study of Religions in Africa: Past, Present and Prospect* (Cambridge: Roots and Branches, 1996).

<sup>40</sup> Luther H. Martin, Iva Doležalová, and Dalibor Papoušek, eds., *The Academic Study of Religion During the Cold War: East and West* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001).

formation of cross-cultural knowledge.”<sup>41</sup> A volume comprising the adjunct proceedings of this congress explores the nature of interface between research and dialogue in the context of Christian-Muslim relations in Africa.<sup>42</sup> These proceedings clearly indicate that by the end of the twentieth century importance of regional and local contexts of subject matter, as well as cultural contingencies of scholarly theories and methodologies were being increasingly recognised. Apparently, such awareness about the perspectival nature of the theory and method meant new challenges for the idea of a universally applicable scientific (*religionswissenschaftliche*) method postulated in the IAHR’s five principles.

### Two Emergent Tendencies

However, for majority of the scholars in the field the increased awareness about different cultural perspectives and regional contexts in the study of religion does not warrant a compromise on ideals like objectivity, neutrality, and the universally applicable scientific methodologies. So, can one say that the spirit of Congress 1960 still prevails? The answer seems to be affirmative, to a large measure, if one were to track along the debate of method and theory as developed at Marburg itself since the Congress 1960. To begin with, the special conference of the IAHR entitled “The Institutional Environment of the Study of Religion” convened in Marburg in 1988 is worth mentioning. Its purpose was to address the issue of different institutional and ideological constraints on the religious studies in different parts of the world. The theme of the special conference was an echo of the overtones of the Congress 1960. Interestingly, important scholars like Annemarie Schimmel, Ugo Bianchi, Zwi Werblowsky, Lauri Honko and Kurt Rudolph who were taking part in the special conference had already attended the Congress 1960 in which the five principles of IAHR were proclaimed.

Proceedings of the conference were published under the heading of *Marburg Revisited: Institutions and Strategies in the Study of Religion*,<sup>43</sup> which comprised theoretical papers such as “Cultural and Organizational Perspectives in the Study of Religion,”<sup>44</sup> “Fundamental Problem in the World-

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<sup>41</sup> Selected papers from this session appeared in *Numen: International Review for the History of Religions* 48, no. 3 (2001).

<sup>42</sup> Klaus Hock, ed., *The Interface between Research and Dialogue: Christian-Muslim Relations in Africa: Adjunct Proceedings of the XVIIIth Quinquennial Congress of the International Association for the History of Religions (5–11 August 2000, Durban/South Africa)* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2004).

<sup>43</sup> Michael Pye, ed., *Marburg Revisited: Institutions and Strategies in the Study of Religion* (Marburg: diagonal-Verlag, 1989), 7.

<sup>44</sup> Pye, “Cultural and Organizational Perspectives in the Study of Religion,” in *Marburg Revisited: Institutions and Strategies in the Study of Religion*, ed. Michael Pye (Marburg: diagonal-

Wide Pursuit of the Study of Religion,”<sup>45</sup> and “The Study of Religion in the Context of Catholic Culture.”<sup>46</sup> Moreover, a session of the special conference focused on religious studies in Catholic, Jewish and Protestant culture and another session on the religious studies in Africa, the Islamic world, and China. Thus, compared to the universalistic thrust of the “minimum conditions for the study of religion” *Marburg Revisited* appears to be a move towards contextualising the study of religion with regard to different regions, cultures, and religions.

However, it seems that in spite of apparent recognition of various regional and cultural contexts, critical issues like how far the scholarly methods can be contingent on specific historical situations and cultural perspectives were not dealt with squarely. Likewise, representation of various scholarly traditions was not taken into account. For instance, in the session titled “Religious Studies in Africa, the Islamic world and China” voices of the Muslim scholars in the field were missing. It is noteworthy that Ismail Raji al-Faruqi’s articles on the academic study of religion had already appeared in IAHR’s own organ *Numen: International Review for the History of Religions*.<sup>47</sup> Thus, *Marburg Revisited* might be endorsing plurality of contexts of the study of religion, but it tends to avert the recognition of various indigenous knowledge traditions as alternative scholarly perspectives in the field.

Persistence of the essential spirit of the basic minimum presuppositions for the study of religion proclaimed at the Congress 1960 can also be instantiated with reference to the work of Michael Pye who had been associated with the University of Marburg for quite some time and currently works as General Editor of the *Marburg Journal of Religion*. His academic stature is evident from the fact that he has been the Secretary General and then the President of IAHR. In 1974, he contributed a paper on the problem of method in the study of religion in which he propounded a nuanced phenomenological method for the study of religion and tried to take into account the criticism levelled against it from different scholarly circles.<sup>48</sup> He

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Verlag, 1989).

<sup>45</sup> Thomas Lawson, “Fundamental Problem in the World-Wide Pursuit of the Study of Religion,” in *Marburg Revisited: Institutions and Strategies in the Study of Religion*, ed. Michael Pye (Marburg: diagonal-Verlag, 1989).

<sup>46</sup> Ugo Bianchi, “The Study of Religion in the Context of Catholic Culture,” in *Marburg Revisited: Institutions and Strategies in the Study of Religion*, ed. Michael Pye (Marburg: diagonal-Verlag, 1989).

<sup>47</sup> See Isma‘il Raji A. al-Faruqi, “History of Religions: Its Nature and Significance for Christian Education and the Muslim-Christian Dialogue,” *Numen* 12, no. 1 (1965): 35–65; al-Faruqi, “History of Religions: Its Nature and Significance for Christian Education and the Muslim-Christian Dialogue (Continuation),” *Numen* 12, no. 2 (1965): 81–86.

<sup>48</sup> Michael Pye, “Problems of Method in the Interpretation of Religion,” *Japanese Journal of*

brought to fore an interesting case of critical, comparative, and historical study of religion in Japan from as early as the eighteenth century. However, instead of taking this example as a clue to existence of different cultural perspectives and scholarly traditions in the study of religion, he sees in this instance a reason to believe the universality of modern academic study of religion. In fact, he thinks that the example unmasks what he calls “Westernism” of those scholars who tend to point out the Eurocentric nature of the modern academic study of religion.<sup>49</sup> Russel T. McCutcheon is another example to substantiate this point further, who around the end of the twentieth century, contributed to the *Marburg Journal of Religion* an article titled “‘The Common Ground on Which Students of Religion Meet’: Methodology and Theory within the IAHR.”<sup>50</sup> The catchphrase in the title of his article is taken verbatim from the “basic minimum conditions for the study of religion” proclaimed during the Congress 1960, to emphasise the importance and relevance of the IAHR’s five principles regardless of the new critical voices. So, one can say that even after being revisited, the original spirit of Marburg prevails, at least in European scholarship.

What exactly taking different cultural perspectives and regional contexts into consideration implies, became a topic of debate at another congress that took place on the American soil, in Boston, Massachusetts. The proceedings of this congress came out with the startling title of *The Future of the Study of Religion: Proceedings of Congress 2000*. This volume contains interesting topics like the tension between normative and descriptive study of religion, how the discipline of religious studies is related to theology, the impact of globalization on the study of religion, various critical questions raised about the comparative method, the impact of gender on the study of religion, and so on.<sup>51</sup> In his contribution to this volume, Pye reiterates the contention that the religious studies is a coherent worldwide discipline, which “is neither religiously motivated nor scientifically orthodox, but is an academic discipline that possesses certain methodological and theoretical qualifications not significantly conditioned by cultural difference.”<sup>52</sup> However, at the same

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*Religious Studies* 1, nos. 2–3 (1974): 114–17.

<sup>49</sup> Pye, “Westernism Unmasked,” in *Secular Theories on Religion: Current Perspectives*, ed. Mikael Rothstein and Tim Jensen (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2000), 222–24.

<sup>50</sup> Russell T. McCutcheon, “‘The Common Ground on Which Students of Religion Meet’: Methodology and Theory Within the IAHR,” *Marburg Journal of Religion* 1, no. 2 (1996), accessed August 27, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.17192/mjr.1996.1.3780>.

<sup>51</sup> Slavica Jakelić and Lori Pearson, “Introduction: Wither the Comparative Religion,” in *The Future of the Study of Religion: Proceedings of Congress 2000*, ed. Slavica Jakelić and Lori Pearson (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 1–22.

<sup>52</sup> Michael Pye, “Difference and Coherence in the Worldwide Study of Religion,” in *The Future*

occasion, Robert Neville problematised Pye's understanding of study of religion as a clearly defined discipline with "proper" and "known methods" and his consideration for the theoretical and methodological determinations to be taken for granted. According to Neville, "The study of religions cannot be organized around non-negotiable positivistic discourse and cannot reach its coherence 'by virtue of a canon of methods.'"<sup>53</sup> In the same volume, Christoph Schwöbel maintains that the religious studies has entered a new phase in which its Eurocentric character had been recognized and the need for multiple methodological choices and strategies is being advocated<sup>54</sup> instead of a single and universally applicable method or set of methods.

Hence, it can be seen that the basic difference among scholars in the field is not on whether the religious studies should be internationalized or not, nor would many disagree today that various institutional and regional contexts should be taken into account while studying religion. Rather, the point of debate is implications of this awareness, which culminate in issues like impact of identity on scholarship,<sup>55</sup> insiders' and outsiders' perspectives in the study of religion,<sup>56</sup> and the relationship between theology and the religious studies.<sup>57</sup> Majority of scholars stick to the ideal of an objective and universally applicable scientific method or set of methods. According to them, a departure from these ideals would betray the whole enterprise of the academic study of religion. Here, the names of scholars like McCutcheon and Donald Wiebe can be mentioned. Thus, as José Ignacio Cabezón maintains, generally the religious studies is still rooted in the Western theories and methodologies. However, she also notes that a few scholars believe that now we should shift from considering different cultures simply as mute data for theorising to taking them as a possible source of theory, a proposal which she dubs as "theory pluralism," which implies a shift from simply thinking of the others to thinking *with* them.<sup>58</sup> This view has been seen as a "particular Western academic moment of concern for matters of globalization and its effects on the

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*of the Study of Religion: Proceedings of Congress 2000*, ed. Slavica Jakelić and Lori Pearson (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 8.

<sup>53</sup> Slavica Jakelić and Lori Pearson, eds., *The Future of the Study of Religion: Proceedings of Congress 2000* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 9.

<sup>54</sup> Schwöbel, "History of Religions and the Study of Religions," 68.

<sup>55</sup> José Ignacio Cabezón and Sheila Greeve Davaney, eds., *Identity and Politics of Scholarship in the Study of Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

<sup>56</sup> Russell T. McCutcheon, ed., *The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion: A Reader* (New York: Cassel, 1999).

<sup>57</sup> Donald Wiebe, *The Politics of Religious Studies: The Continuing Conflict with Theology in the Academy* (London: Macmillan, 1999).

<sup>58</sup> José Ignacio Cabezón, "The Discipline and Its Other: The Dialectic of Alterity in the Study of Religion," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 74, no. 1 (2006): 30-31.



academic discipline of the study of religions.”<sup>59</sup> More of the same, theory pluralism implies that various indigenous knowledge traditions are not simply mute objects, but also a reservoir of theoretical insights acknowledging which can lead to a genuinely international and cross-cultural discipline of the religious studies.

## Conclusion

The above survey of relevant academic materials and important conferences of IAHR reveals that initially European and North-American scholars of religion shared a general assumption that their theories and methodologies were not contingent on cultural differences and, therefore, were universally applicative. However, the attempt to internationalise the discipline through IAHR after the mid-twentieth century brought them in greater contact with non-Western cultures and scholarly traditions. This development exposed, to some extent, the Eurocentric nature of the academic study of religion and highlighted its cultural baggage. Apart from the institutional attempt to internationalise the discipline, the phenomenon of globalisation and increased intercultural contacts and communications also pushed scholars to acknowledge the role of various cultural settings and regional contexts in shaping the scholarly approaches to religion. As a corollary such realisation brought to limelight a new set of theoretical and methodological issues like role of identity of scholars in their academic pursuits, representation of the unrepresented, insider and outsider standpoints, cross-cultural communication, relationship between theology and religious studies, friction between local and global structures, and so on. Gradually many scholars realised the perspectival nature of theory and method in the study of religion.

For some scholars, such awareness implies that genuine internationalisation of the study of religion is not plausible with monolithically conceived notions like objectivity, neutrality, and scientific method. According to this view, different cultures are not mute data lying out there to be analysed by scholars, rather various civilisations of the world have their own scholarly traditions with their peculiar worldviews and epistemologies, which can enrich the enterprise of the study of religion at theoretical level. Therefore, diverse cultural perspectives from around the globe need to be taken into account to meaningfully make the academic study of religion a truly worldwide pursuit.

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<sup>59</sup> Patrice Brodeur, “North Africa and West Asia,” in *Religious Studies: A Global View*, ed. Gregory D. Alles (London: Routledge, 2008), 76.

On the other hand, majority of scholars in the field would maintain that to uncover different cultural contingencies of the work of scholars is definitely welcome and enriching. However, they would caution that recognition of different academic perspectives and cultural contexts do not warrant an open license for explicit ideological or religious agendas. For, opening such a door would risk regression of the whole enterprise of academic study of religion to medieval style polemics between different faith traditions. These scholars would also warn that if the original scientific ethos and fundamental spirit of detached academic study of religion were compromised, it would lead to demise of the whole enterprise. Therefore notwithstanding recognition of the fact that absolute objectivity is nearly impossible to achieve in humanities and social sciences, academicians need to practice maximum level of humanly possible objectivity in their studies. In short, according to this view, notwithstanding internalisation of the study of religion and the resultant awareness about different contingencies afforded by cultural, political, institutional, and civilisational contexts, the essential scientific ethos should continue to define the fundamental character of religious studies.

Apparently, the dilemma is how to meaningfully recognise the legitimate and enriching role of different cultural, religious, and intellectual perspectives in the study of religion without succumbing to sheer relativism, overt agendas, and medieval style polemics between different faith traditions. Considered against constraints of the two above-stated tendencies, scholars from the predominantly Western academic settings need to rise above the Western cultural baggage and Eurocentric theoretical postulates, and be ready to accept plurality of scholarly traditions contributed by different civilisations of the world. On the other hand, scholars from the non-Western scholarly traditions need to demonstrate that they can enrich the global enterprise of the academic study of religion with their indigenous theoretical insights without becoming explicitly apologetic or assuming their peculiar cultural perspectives to be binding for the whole world. If and how equilibrium between these apparently opposing demands is achieved, only time will tell.

