SUMMARY OF THE DISCUSSION

BY

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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), Brellich (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