The famous historian of religions, Kurt Rudolph, once wrote in lecture four of his *Historical Fundamentals and the Study of Religions* (1985):

Only thanks to the guiding lights and the overwhelming majority of the members of the International Association for the History of Religions have the most recent world congresses of this body avoided slipping into congresses of religion after the model of the Parliament held in Chicago in 1893. If the history of religions is to preserve its spirit and further its autonomy, it must not only work out the peculiarities of its methods, it must also revive its religio-critical, or rather, its ideological function.

This quotation aptly sums up the situation characteristic of the IAHR.2 This volume of papers from the XVIIth Congress of the International Association for the History of Religions which was held in Mexico City in 1995 illustrates perhaps more than anything else exactly what Rudolph meant. Indeed, the majority of IAHR members are committed to a common endeavor centering on a refusal to confuse the practice of religion with its academic study, whereas the ways and means of contributing to that endeavor are the subject of continual debate and disagreement. Furthermore, this debate is closely interwoven with the problematic identity and autonomy of the non-confessional, academic study of religion. It is symptomatic of the IAHR that its Mexico congress served simultaneously as a forum for sophisticated theoretical papers and a highly impassioned debate on the name of the organization that roughly followed the divide

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2 For information on the IAHR, see its website at: http://www.uni-marburg.de/ fb03/religionswissenschaft/iahr.
between historical approaches on the one hand and social scientific and theoretical approaches on the other.

The ideal would certainly be a combination of both approaches as demonstrated, for instance, in the work of Kurt Rudolph. This introduction will attempt to explain the inherent tension and, at the same time, contextualize the papers in this collection within the longstanding interest in methodological and theoretical issues characteristic of IAHR members.

1. Characteristics of the study of religion

The academic study of religion can be characterized as follows: 1) it is a composite field of study; 2) it is based on a methodological pluralism; 3) it is influenced by specializations and local institutional and cultural traditions; and 4) it is caught in a web of epistemological tensions.¹

1.1. Composite field

The comparative science of religion was given shape by the German expatriot at Oxford, Friedrich Max Müller, during the middle of the 19th century.² There is some debate on what he exactly achieved and whether he succeeded, as Eric Sharpe claimed, in recruiting “an

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