COMPARING THE RELIGIO-HISTORICAL AND THE THEOLOGICAL METHOD

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This theme gives rise to a series of questions. For the first it is dubious whether theoretical considerations on methodology are very fruitful and attractive. Not improperly it has been said that discussing methodology is like an endlessly sharpening of a knife whilst one never gets something to eat. Such a theoretical exposition mostly is a bloodless argument which some people perhaps read with pleasure, but which is not to the taste of historians of religions. They are fascinated by the religious phenomena to such a degree, that they do not allow themselves time to reflect on the method of their study. Secondly the question arises whether one can deal with the method of history of religions and of theology without taking the object of the two disciplines into account. The method of a discipline generally results from its object. It is wellknown that each science approaches its material in its own way. Therefore one cannot compare the method of the two disciplines without taking their principles into considerations. Thirdly it is evident that there exists difference of opinion on the character and the object both of history of religions and of theology. How can the methods of the two disciplines be compared when there is no communis opinio on their principles? Fourthly it can be questioned whether it is useful to deal with the question in the abstract. It is clear that everyone who writes about the subject, starts from certain tacit presuppositions. Some decades ago objectivity was proclaimed as the sole principle of science. Nowadays scholars have come to the insight that how impartial

1) This article has originally been written for a volume on “History of Religions and Theology: Essays in Methodology” which for technical reasons could not be published. Assuming that the subscribers to Numen are interested in the subject, I decided to publish the treatise in the journal of the IAH, C.J.B.
they may try to be, everyone looks at the subject of his study from his own angle, even the students of natural science who were formerly supposed to be absolutely unbiased. This holds certainly also true for the student of history of religions. Though he is obliged to present an unprejudiced picture of the religion which he is studying, he must be conscious of the fact that he involuntarily is influenced by the attitude which he takes to the subject of his inquiry. The implications of this situation are twofold: a) the historian of religions should acknowledge that his method is coloured by his personal outlook on the material which he handles. b) he should realize that he is moulded by a certain religio-historical tradition, which means that he is the follower of a certain national school. In regard to the second point it is mostly forgotten that the study of history of religions is strongly influenced by the cultural, spiritual and scholarly atmosphere in which the study takes place. One can make a further step. The character of history of religions is generally determined by the function which the discipline fulfils in the system of academical instruction of the country in question. Too little attention is paid to this background. Yet the scholarly milieu can be decisive for the manner in which the study of history of religions is conceived of. These spiritual surroundings often explain why a certain method is chosen. The present author therefore doubts whether it is of any use to treat the question of the relation of the religio-historical method to the theological method in the abstract. At any rate it will surely clarify his own standpoint when he starts by sketching the Dutch background of his study. After having described the respective problematics in Holland he can take a further step by voicing some views that have a more general and international significance.

In the Netherlands history of religions is pursued by scholars of different faculties and of different confessions. Historians of religions are to be found not only among the theologians, but also amidst the philologists, the historians, the sociologists, the psychologists, the ethnologists etc. They may be Protestants of different denominations, or Roman Catholics, or persons who belong to no church and do not profess any creed. This fact deserves special notice. The majority of these scholars study history of religions as an interesting subject alongside their actual professional study. They hardly come in touch with theology. They are not forced to confront their method with that of theology. They study religio-historical problems in a matter of fact