A REPORT ON THE "INTERNATIONAL ACADEMIC CONFERENCE ON RELIGION," BEIJING, APRIL 6-10, 1992

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The International Association for the History of Religions (IAHR) was especially pleased to hold a conference for the first time in China, the second time in Asia (as an IAHR International Congress was held in Tokyo in 1958). The IAHR aims to be a truly international organization and has been very supportive in recent years of the nascent discipline of Religious Studies in the People's Republic of China (PRC). In this report, I would like to introduce the conference's organizers and participants, its academic content, and its overall nature.

Organizers and Participants

The Chinese organizers were from the Institute of World Religions (IWR) of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and the Chinese Association of Religious Studies (CARS), Beijing. IWR was founded in 1964, but has been much more active since the late 1970's. Since that time it has accepted 40 students into its M.A. and Ph.D. programs; and it has helped to establish the first faculty in religious studies at a Chinese university (Beijing University, Philosophy Department). CARS, founded in 1988, is an academic affiliate of the IAHR for scholars all over China. According to its constitution:

The association is a nationwide nonofficial academic organization of researchers on religions. Guided by the principles of Integrating Theory with Practice and Letting a Hundred Schools of Thought Contend, the association will play an active role in arranging academic exchanges and activities both at home and abroad, so as to develop and promote religious studies, thus contributing to the cultural undertakings in China.

Organizers from IWR and CARS were even more concerned than IAHR organizers about the success of the conference. Despite recent progress, the discipline of Religious Studies is not yet secure and totally beyond suspicion in the PRC. This international conference played an important legitimation function for local organizers and scholars. As the title they gave to the conference indicates, they wanted to stress its "international" and "academic" nature Foreign scholars were aware of these factors and tried to avoid making any impolitic remarks, although there were in fact
quite frank discussions (especially outside of formal sessions) about the religious situation in China, including problems of researching religion in China.

Formal participants in the conference included 26 foreign scholars and 18 local scholars. The foreign scholars were from Europe and U.K. (11), North America (8), Japan and Korea (6), and Israel (1). Local scholars were mostly from IWR and other units of the Academy of Social Sciences, yet a few were present from the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences (2) and Nanjing Union Theological Seminary (2). Many participants, including local scholars, were not experts in native Chinese religions, a fact which explains the conference's two themes: "Foreign Religions and Chinese Culture" and "Religion and Modernization."

As this was a regional conference of the IAHR and the number of participants was limited, sessions were conducive to lively discussions between participants. Each day began with two plenary sessions, after which participants divided into two groups for several more sessions connected with the two themes. All participants, including local scholars, lived together in Beijing's Exhibition Centre Hotel and had all their meals together, which provided excellent opportunities for discussions outside of formal sessions. There was one day during the conference when foreign scholars were invited to visit the Great Wall, Beijing's Lama Temple (Yong He Gong), and the Beijing Master Kong Temple (Kongzi Miao). Assistance was also provided in arranging other travel to religious monuments in China prior to and following the week of the conference.

**Academic Content**

One of the most fascinating aspects of the conference was the enthusiasm with which the local scholars addressed methodological issues. For them, the names (and the seminal ideas connected to them) of Weber, Tillich, Bultmann, Berger, and Wittgenstein, to give a few examples, are relatively new. A whole world has opened in recent years for their exploration. If one had to identify a single figure who is now greatly influencing Chinese social scientists, it would be Weber rather than Marx. In Taiwan, the decade of the 1980's was the time when "Weber was hot" (Wei Bo re); in the PRC, this same trend is now underway. Although foreign scholars may have felt that local scholars still had a long way to go methodologically, the latter approached certain issues with marked insight. One reason for this is that these scholars have had a deeply existential interest in certain issues, such as that of "religion and modernization." They have been strongly motivated to seek answers to key