Obituary

In a joking reference to his long-standing involvement in the study of Kabbalah, his adult children affectionately called him among themselves “The Spark.” Zwi Werblowsky, who passed away in Jerusalem on 9 July 2015, seemed to have a constant spark in his eyes. During his lectures, one was under the impression that his eyes were not scanning the room but the whole world, past and present, in search of examples and counterexamples for the phenomena he had just been describing to his students, covering the whole spectrum of religious beliefs and myths, ritual practices and traditions. On the campus of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, for decades, Zwi Werblowsky cut quite an impressive, singular figure: tall and elegant, he was never to be caught without a red carnation in his lapel — except, of course, when donning his kimono at home. (I doubt very much whether anyone else in Israel was following that old world habit of manly elegance). Werblowsky was an insatiable global traveler, and his lectures and seminars would take his baffled and enchanted students from the sexual life in the Trobriand Islands, as studied by Malinowski, to Japan’s new religions, from Pascal’s Jansenism to Lévi-Strauss’s *Mythologiques*, from comparisons between Jewish and Christian mysticism, or Christian and Buddhist monasticism, to psychoanalysis and religion. Carl Gustav Jung even wrote a preface to his first book, *Lucifer and Prometheus: A Study of Milton’s Satan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952).

Coming from Manchester and Leeds in the mid-1950s, Werblowsky had followed a Ruf to establish (together with the late Neutestamentler and Judaist David Flusser) a Department of Comparative Religion at Hebrew University. (It is a sad fact that to this day, and despite far reaching transformations in the Israeli academic system, this Department remains the only one of its kind in the country).

In order to be fully understood, he taught, religious phenomena should always be studied both in context (that goes without saying) and comparatively, with “similar” phenomena, from other times and other cultures. It was obvious to him, as to any student of comparative religion, that differences between such phenomena matter much more than the similarities between them. In his way, he was challenging the academic establishment, which insisted on clear-cut boundaries between the disciplines — with, as a consequence, entrenched fields and little interdisciplinary cooperation. “No culture is an island” was perhaps the most obvious message Werblowsky intended to impart — and succeeded in imparting — to the many students who attended his lectures. In those years, Israeli society remained very much isolated, and travel abroad was still difficult and expensive.

The French Jewish historian of religion Salomon Reinach once said that while being religious is not a precondition for the study of religions, it may be