MARBURG — AND AFTER?

BY

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Two years after the Tokyo Congress, the Xth International Congress for the History of Religions has been held in Marburg (September 11-17, 1960). The continuity of the two congresses was emphasized not only by the participation of an appreciable number of members from Asian countries, but also by the fact that H. I. H. Prince Mikasa, the Hon. President of the Tokyo Congress, graciously consented to fulfill the same function at Marburg. His presence lent distinction to the Congress, both by the dignity and charm with which he fulfilled his official duties and by his scholarly participation in the work of those sections that were closest to his own fields of study.

Marburg provided a most lovely and attractive setting for the Congress. The charm of the town and its surrounding landscape, as well as the august traditions of Marburg and Marburg University (who could not help thinking of the celebrated Religionsgespräch between Luther and Zwingli, or of the name of Rudolf Otto?) created an atmosphere of pleasant intimacy and scholarly dignity to which all congress-members were sensitive and for which they were genuinely grateful. The Secretary General as well as the local Organizing Committee presided over by Prof. Heiler, had worked hard to prepare the Congress, and Prof. Annemarie Schimmel and her small but devoted staff, labouring indefatigably both before and during the Congress, more than earned the admiration and gratitude of all participants for their unfailing kindness and good temper.

The actual work of the Congress (leaving aside the opening ceremony and the one-day excursion to Fulda) was done during five days of sessions, divided into meetings of sections in the mornings and general lectures in the afternoons. There were, practically, ten sections: Primitive Religions (15 papers), Ancient Orient and Judaism (18 papers), Buddhism and Japanese Religions (19 papers), Greek and
Roman Religion (9 papers), Iran (9 papers), Islam (10 papers), India (8 papers), China (4 papers), Christianity (19 papers) and General Phenomenology of Religions, including Philosophy, Sociology and Psychology of Religion (16 papers). Some papers might with advantage have been allotted to other sections than those in which they were presented. An analysis of the numbers of papers presented in the various sections might make an intriguing and instructive study, though it must be kept in mind that very much depends on all kinds of extraneous and accidental factors. Thus e.g. the number of scholars from a particular country finding it possible to attend a congress at a given moment may affect the balance of the subjects discussed. Nonetheless the fact that the Congress subsumed philosophy, sociology and psychology of religion together with phenomenology under the one heading “General Phenomenology”, and that this whole section counted not more than 16 papers, certainly deserves to be noted. The final meeting of the Congress on Saturday afternoon, which also functioned as a session of the “General Assembly” of the I.A.H.R., brought a significant innovation of which more will be said anon.

To look back on Marburg is, when all is said and done, more than just to report on a Congress. Remembering Tokyo two years earlier, and taking account of the fact that another congress has been scheduled for 1963 in India, any report on Marburg must include a review of recent developments and trends in the now truly “international” Association for the History of Religions. The Marburg experience is a particularly timely occasion for such stock-taking, since no human enterprise—and certainly no congress for the History of Religions—is so perfect that no lessons or, at least, profitable reflections can be drawn from it. Some of these reflections are of a more organizational nature and of relevance mainly to the planning of future congresses; others are more directly concerned with the prospects of the History of Religions (in the widest sense of Religionswissenschaft) as a discipline well-defined and scientific enough to make it worthwhile for scholars to maintain a special organization for its promotion.

Regarding the first point it should be said at once that the increasing “congress happiness” of contemporary scholarship is becoming a definite threat to the institution of congresses as such. The large number of attendances and the large number of sections meeting concurrently, of necessity result in increasing fragmentation into specialisms