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Should the IAHR Seek a 'Science' Peculiar to Its Community of Scholars? [*1]

DONALD WIEBE

> The fact of progress is written plain and large on the page of history, but progress is not a law of nature. The ground gained by one generation may be lost by the next.[2]

In 2021, I published *An Argument in Defence of a Strictly Scientific Study of Religion*[3] to show that the International Association for the History of Religions (IAHR) – "founded" in Paris in 1900 to promote a scientific study of religious thought and practice – has been seriously compromised by way of accommodating religious and other extra-scientific normative agendas in the conferences and congresses it has sponsored. I also sought to oppose further damage to its scientific profile lodged by members of the Executive Committee (EC) of the Association at a conference on the future of the IAHR in Delphi in 2019 by criticizing its scientific objective as "parochial", by arguing that the Association must be open to normatively oriented concerns and diverse epistemological agendas, and by proposing a change of name of the Association to the more inclusive

* The article has not been peer reviewed.

1 This is not a frivolous question. The IAHR will sponsor a special meeting of the Association in Tokyo in 2023 to discuss "what does 'science' mean to the IAHR community of scholars…" (Satoko Fujiwara, *IAHR e-Bulletin Supplement September 2022*, <https://www.iahrweb.org/bulletins/IAHR_e-Bull_Suppl_Sep_2022.pdf>, 19. 9. 2022 [4. 9. 2023], 5). This indicates that the Executive Committee (EC) of the Association is aware that there is concern among scholars in the field about the transformation of the IAHR that seems to be the EC's objective. However, they are asking the wrong question. The question that must be asked is whether a 'science' that is peculiar to the IAHR belongs in the curriculum of the modern research university?

2 H. A. L. Fisher, cited by Karl Popper in *All Life is Problem Solving*, London – New York (NY): Routledge 1999, xi.

3 Donald Wiebe, *An Argument in Defence of a Strictly Scientific Study of Religion*, Toronto: Institute for the Advanced Study of Religion 2021, <https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/handle/1807/124861>, [4. 9. 2023]. The book includes both my critical reflections on a special meeting of the Executive Committee of the IAHR held in Delphi in 2019 to discuss the future of the Association, as well as the documents prepared by the EC to 'guide' those conversations. The meeting was held in Dionysos Hall in the European Cultural Centre of Delphi, 13-15 September 2019.

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"International Association for the *Study of Religion*" to clearly advertise the radically transformed 'corporate identity' of the Association they seek.

I note here that several scholars who have reviewed the book express similar concerns about the EC's decision to make the IAHR a more inclusivist organization by rejecting a strictly scientific approach to the study of religion and including moral, theological and activist objectives as described in its 'Scenarios' document (described and responded to below). Professor Ulrich Berner, for example, concludes his review with the following comments:

> These scenarios were put forth for discussion in Delphi in 2019, and they could have been discussed at the next World Congress, in 2020, if the latter had taken place. So now the members of the IAHR have a larger time-frame to reflect on these 'scenarios' and form a judgment, to be enunciated if applicable/necessary at the next Congress. *The book offers the best starting-point for this reflection-process, as it places the current discussion within a greater chain – the history of the IAHR, in which controversies over the identity and task of* Religionswissenschaft arise again and again (emphasis added).[4]

Although the e-book version is available without cost (see note 3 above for the link), I will provide a brief overview here of the basic structure of the Delphi conference and explain, by way of virtual debate with the President, Secretary General, and Deputy Secretary General of the IAHR, that the Executive Committee's support for transforming the IAHR into an omnibus organization is based on a series of unfounded historical and philosophical assumptions and what literary theorist Stanley Fish calls "outsized ambitions" that are clearly inappropriate in the modern research university.[5]

A 'Focused' Framing of the Delphi Deliberations

It was at its meeting in Ho Chi Minh City in 2017 that the EC decided to organize a meeting of the IAHR in Delphi to pay special attention to the Association's future development in relation to its global objective(s). To accomplish this, it created what it called an "Extended Executive

4 This quotation is from an unpublished English translation by Martha Cunningham of Ulrich Berner, "Donald Wiebe: An Argument in Defence of a Strictly Scientific Study of Religion. The Controversy at Delphi. A Critical Account of the Meeting of the Extended Executive Committee of the International Association for the History of Religions, September 13-15, 2019, Delphi, Greece. Institute for the Advanced Study of Religion. Toronto, Ontario, Canada 2021. 345 Seiten", *Zeitschrift für Religionswissenschaft* 30/1, 2022, 214-222.

5 Stanley Fish, "Tip to Professors: Just Do Your Job", in Stanley Fish (ed.), *Think Again: Contrarian Reflections on Life, Culture, Politics, Religion, Law, and Education*, Princeton (NJ): Princeton University Press 2015, 308.

Committee" (EEC) comprising former IAHR presidents, secretaries general, directors of IAHR world congresses, editors of IAHR publications, and sundry others with similar experiences of the Association on which they could draw.

Before arriving in Delphi, members of the EEC received from the EC a letter of invitation and a document titled "Suggested Main Themes and Reading Resources" for framing the Delphi discussions.[6] That document is problematic in that it implies that the IAHR had espoused the 'dual objectives' of pursuing a strictly scientific study of religion while simultaneously ensuring the 'globalization' of the IAHR by way of an openness to all possible styles of and approaches to the study of religion. Such a 'dual objectives' hypothesis, however, is not only methodologically incoherent, it is also historically wrong. The original epistemic objective of the Paris historians of religion in 1900, which formed the foundation of the modern legal incorporation of the IAHR in Amsterdam in 1950, was *to globalize the scientific study of religion*. Although normative concerns and agendas – moral and political – infiltrated the Association in the intervening period, the IAHR reaffirmed its original purely scientific objective at its World Congress in Marburg in 1960 by adopting Zwi Werblowsky's 'basic minimum presuppositions' for the study of religion to be promoted by the 'new' (1950) IAHR.

As will become clear from this overview, EEC participants in the Delphi meeting unexpectedly received two further documents from the EC that framed their deliberations. The first was a paper by the Deputy Secretary General (Professor Ann Taves) attacking the IAHR's acceptance in 1960 of Professor Werblowsky's statement of 'basic minimum [scientific] presuppositions' as descriptive of the IAHR's governing objective. The second was a document titled "IAHR Scenarios: 2020 and Beyond" that is consistent with Taves's rejection of the IAHR's restrictive scientific study of religion as "parochial". That document proposed the adoption of an "inclusivist" model for the IAHR that will permit it to promote a wide range of intellectual and academic agendas that will attract a broad range of "religious studies" scholars into its orbit, ensuring, as the EC sees it, the Association's continued existence and increasing its influence on the field as a whole.

6 The EC also sent out two 'position papers' I wrote for the Delphi meetings which I hoped would be discussed in Delphi (D. Wiebe, *An Argument*…, chapter 4, 5). I refer to them explicitly later in this paper.

The Radical Import of the Delphi Framing Documents

Tim Jensen and Satoko Fujiwara claim that I have incorrectly asserted that the EC of the Association under their leadership has made a decision "to include in its [the IAHR's] mandate the promotion of 'theological, normative, and applied studies of religion'" as stated on the back cover of my book. I use the word 'mandate' in the book to indicate that the IAHR leadership has the authority to carry out policy and, in the Delphi discussions about the future of the IAHR, I show that the decisions taken by the EC amount to authorizing a new set of aims and objectives for the IAHR – intellectual and cultural – that diminishes and corrupts its traditional and current scientific objectives. In that regard, the denial by the members of the EC that the future IAHR they have in mind will promote "theological, normative, and applied" studies is surprising because the last of the three framing documents for the Delphi meeting espouses precisely such an incoherent expansion of the IAHR's current scientific agenda. The historical and still current objectives of the IAHR are clearly stated in the first of the framing documents – "Suggested Main Themes and Reading Resources" (Jensen and Fujiwara). However, the second framing document, "The Future of the Study of Religion" (Taves), then provides argument in support of jettisoning the IAHR's current 'mandate.'[7] And the third framing document, "IAHR Scenarios: 2020 and Beyond" (Fujiwara, Taves, and Bornet, with input from David Thurfjell and, ultimately, 'seen' by all members of the EC), elaborately articulates the new 'mandate' that will determine the IAHR's future that I refer to in my book.

In the first framing document – "Main Themes and Reading Resources" – Jensen and Fujiwara ask:

> … [H]ow well are we actually doing while 'globalising,' not in regard to the increased numbers of members and affiliates from around the world, but in regard to *our stated aim* [emphasis added], namely to promote and carve out more and more space all over the globe for the academic, scientific, analytical, historical, cross-cultural study of religion [as set out by Werblowsky]: If the IAHR has any *raison d'être* it is by reason of a division of labor which makes the Organization the respon-

7 Taves has argued that she merely expressed her personal views in this essay. This, however, seems unlikely since the paper was distributed to all members of the EEC prior to the meeting; she was also given time to address the EEC in which she reiterated her 'complaint' about the 1960 IAHR acceptance of the 'Werblowsky statement'; and she was a major author of the "IAHR Scenarios: 2020 and Beyond" document, in which the EC outlined, in positive terms, an alternative approach to the study of religion virtually identical to that recommended by Taves in her essay and oral address to the EEC in Delphi.

> sible organ and international ground for the scholars who wish to serve the cause of *Religionswissesnschaft* in its strict sense.[8]

Jensen and Fujiwara then acknowledge that this is "a view and a stance, then and later, supported by each and every IAHR officer expressing him- or herself about the IAHR 'identity' and task…"[9] Tellingly, however, they go on to ask:

> … [D]o 'we,' the participants to the meeting in Delphi, and thus the current EC too, actually agree that the Werblowsky Marburg 1960 statement[10] is still a useful starting point for an agreement or consensus of what constitutes … with reference exactly to Werblowsky and Marburg 1960 … the 'corporate identity' of the IAHR? Are we ready to stand up for and defend this point of departure for the kind of academic and scientific approach promoted by the IAHR as well as the linked understanding of the *raison d'êre* of the IAHR? *We thus want to look back to make sure we agree upon what it is we, the IAHR, have been talking about and done since the early 1950s, and in the time after Marburg 1960 and 1988* (emphasis added).[11]

The tension between these passages is glaringly obvious – the first passage confirming the IAHR's commitment to *promoting the scientific study of religion on a global scale* whereas the second raises doubt about whether that commitment should constitute the corporate identity of the IAHR in the future or not.[12] This gave me sufficient cause to express my positive

8 D. Wiebe, *An Argument*…, 235-236.

9 *Ibid*., 236.

10 Werblowsky presented what he considered the "basic minimum presuppositions" that should govern the scientific study of religion to be promoted under the banner of the IAHR. They include: (i) seeking "a better understanding of the nature of the variety and historic individuality of religions, whilst remaining constantly alert to the possibility of *scientifically legitimate* generalizations concerning the nature and function of religion"; (ii) recognizing that whatever else religions may be, they are "undoubtedly empirical facts of human existence and history, to be studied like all human facts, by the appropriate methods"; (iii) rejecting the claim that the study of religion is based on recognition that it is the realization of a transcendent truth; (iv) acknowledging that "[t]he study of religions need not seek for justification from outside itself so long as it remains embedded in a culture pattern that allows for every quest of historical truth as its own *raison d'êre*"; and (v) rejecting "the promotion of certain ideals – national, international, political, social, spiritual and otherwise." In a personal communication, Professor Tom Lawson insists that Werblowsky's statement is key to understanding the IAHR. "While his philosophy can be updated," he writes, "it should not be rejected because it establishes the historical and scientific study of religion which is a descriptive and explanatory form of inquiry and is the reason for having an IAHR in the first place" (26. 9. 2022).

11 D. Wiebe, *An Argument*…, 236.

12 This passage clearly indicates that the EC had serious reservations about the IAHR's academic profile based on the Association's commitment to the promotion of the strictly scientific study of religion. As I have shown in my book (and encapsulate that argument here), the Delphi conference was sponsored to find a way of rejecting the IAHR's commitment to the scientific study of religion without appearing to be doing

view on what the Association's globalization objective really was from the beginning of its existence. In that regard I submitted a paper for distribution to members of the EEC – "Globalization: Expansion and Demise of the IAHR"[13] – in which I briefly traced the emergence and development of the IAHR from the Paris meeting in 1900 through its formal institutional establishment in Amsterdam in 1950, and finally, to the reaffirmation of its original commitment to promoting a strictly scientific study of religion in Marburg in 1960.[14]

The second framing document for the Delphi meeting came forward unexpectedly in the form of a paper – "The Future of the Study of Religion" – authored by Ann Taves, the Deputy Secretary General of the IAHR, and distributed to members of the EEC prior to the Delphi meeting. It was a clearly enunciated "No" to the question raised by Jensen and Fujiwara in the first framing document. Taves, that is, rejected the Werblowsky 'basic minimum [scientific] presuppositions' for the study of religion and viewed the traditionally strictly scientific objectives of the IAHR as "parochial". It is unclear whether the views this paper presented were shared by the full EC. Although Taves claims it was a personal statement, it seems to have been accepted by all members of the EC, then and subsequently, given that no member of the EC objected to the claim she was making. I had presented serious criticism of Taves's claims in my essay "'Know Thyself": Delphi 2019 and the Future of the IAHR," which I read on the opening day of the meeting.[15] However, my criticism of her open rejection of the scientific objectives of the IAHR was met with total silence; it made no impact whatsoever on how the Delphi conference proceeded thereafter. Indeed, Taves was permitted to deliver an oral address in Delphi in which she repeated her attack on Werblowsky and on my support for a strictly scientific study of religion and, once again, without dissent from any member of the EC. In what Taves refers to as her ten-minute address to the EEC,[16] she again responded to the question that Jensen and Fujiwara raised in the first framing document – "Are we willing to stand up for Werblowsky's understanding"? [with] "No, not as it stands,"[17] as though she was speaking for every other member of the EC and EEC.[18]

so. Integrity in the EC's behaviour demands that it acknowledge its ultimate objective and state clearly in a proposal it intends to have the IC recommend to the GA for approval at the 2025 IAHR World Congress.

13 D. Wiebe, *An Argument*…, 103-116.

14 *Ibid*., chapter 4, 103-116.

15 *Ibid*., 141-155.

16 *Ibid*., 294.

17 *Ibid*.

18 In her note for the oral comments made in Delphi, Taves states that she meant to say that Werblowsky's five characteristics of a scientific study of religions needed updat-

And it seems she was speaking for everyone in the Hall since no objection was forthcoming from any of them.[19] Moreover, Taves even refused to comment on my critique of her stand against Werblowsky and what the IAHR stands for since its inception in 1900. As Taves put it:

> I decided to highlight the central point of my paper (that there is more than one way to conceive the scientific study of religion)[20] and then, rather than argue with Wiebe [about what constitutes 'scientific study'], speak to the more general issue raised by Tim [Jensen] in his introduction that morning.[21]

The third framing document was a lengthy paper, "IAHR Scenarios: 2020 and Beyond," distributed only minutes before the session of the meeting in which it was to be discussed and debated. I objected to this development because there simply was not enough time for careful critical analysis of the detailed description of the "scenarios" (i.e., of the existing and possible objectives for the IAHR and institutional structures to achieve them) presented, but my objection was ignored. In essence, the document claims to present three models for the possible organization or reorganization of 'academically' acceptable types of study of religion. However, as I will show, only two distinctly different models, one negatively nominated "ex-

ing (see D. Wiebe, *An Argument*…, 294). Her comment that the scientific study of religion would be "advanced" by thinking of religion as a 'worldview' and a 'way of life', however, do nothing to clarify the notion of 'science' (*Ibid*., 295). As I have noted in my volume on the Delphi meeting, the EC had clearly determined that the use of the word 'science' to describe the IAHR approach to the study of religion would repel rather than attract scholars to the IAHR. It seems that the EC has had a change of mind on this matter: the Secretary General has announced that the IAHR will organize a special conference before the IC meets in 2023 that "will enable intense and in-depth discussion on … what 'science' mean[s] to the IAHR community of scholars in 2023" (S. Fujiwara, *IAHR e-Bulletin*…, 5). However, the suggestions made look more like an attempt to confabulate an understanding of 'science' that transcends the basic minimum presuppositions that govern the natural and social sciences and will make it possible to accommodate the transformation of the 'corporate identity' of the IAHR the EC first sought in Delphi – a corporate identity that can accommodate, as Taves has put it, the "big questions" of life.

19 D. Wiebe, *An Argument*…, 294.

20 The EC, it appears, is intent on establishing a case for a different way of conceiving science before taking this matter to the IC at its next meeting in Tokyo in December of 2023. As Fujiwara puts it in the *IAHR e-Bulletin Supplement September 2022*: "the Special Conference [before the meeting of the IC] will enable intense and in-depth discussion on the kernel of the matter: what does 'science' mean to the IAHR community of scholars in 2023" (S. Fujiwara, *IAHR e-Bulletin*…, 5). It appears that the IAHR thinks 'science' can mean different things to different scholars at different times.

21 As Taves put it: "Tim asks: Are we willing to stand up for Werblowsky's understanding [of science]?" (D. Wiebe, *An Argument*…, 294).

clusive" and the other positively nominated "inclusive", were offered as 'possibilities' for adoption by the IAHR.

Scenario (or Model) A is described as follows:

> The IAHR will continue to affirm the academic aims and norms set forth by Zwi Werblowsky in 1960, in particular the notion that the study of religion 'like physics or archaeology,' is the same in the East and in the West: religion is studied scientifically or it is not (Werblowsky 1960, 219). This statement was discussed in the Marburg Congress (1960) and is reflected in the IAHR constitution.[22]

Scenario (or Model) B is described in virtually the same words:

> The IAHR will continue to affirm the academic aims and norms set forth by Zwi Werblowsky in 1960, presented and discussed at the Marburg Congress (1960), and reflected in the IAHR constitution. The IAHR will conceive of the study of religion [as] an anthropological discipline that studies religious phenomena [sic] as a creation, feature, and aspect of human culture. As such, it is a historical and comparative-systematic discipline that precludes confessional, apologetical, or any other similar concern. It makes a clear distinction between the academic study of religion and theological, soteriological, and activist agendas, which scholars can pursue, if desired, in other contexts.[23]

Scenario/Model A, the current model that presently characterizes the IAHR, and Scenario/Model B are both described as 'exclusivist' because they promote a 'strictly scientific' approach to the study of religion. If there is a distinction between them, it is a distinction without a difference since both, as the Scenarios document puts it, "prioritize the historical and scientific study of religion *at the cost of* various kinds of diversities."[24]

In opposition to the kind of approach represented in both Scenarios/Models A and B, Scenario/Model C presents what Taves, Fujiwara, and the others involved in creating the "Scenarios" document call an "inclusivist" model for the study of religion. As Fujiwara puts it, incorrectly it must be said, this inclusivist model was created to make clear the IAHR's supposed "dual mandates"[25] – a science mandate and a distinctly different, cultural and political, mandate to (inclusively) globalize the IAHR. However, the latter mandate was not a priority of the historians of religion whose scientific historiography grounded the future IAHR, and since 1960, it has been blindingly clear that the IAHR's objective has been to 'globalize' the scientific approach to the study of religion. The EC's talk of "dual mandates" for the IAHR is a spurious notion, emerging from its belief that the IAHR is in competition with other associations and societies for control of the

22 D. Wiebe, *An Argument*…, 308.
23 *Ibid*., 314.
24 *Ibid*., 306, emphasis added.
25 *Ibid*., 299.

field of religious studies and that it is losing that battle because of the IAHR's restrictive notion of an academic study of religion appropriate to the modern research university having to be strictly scientific. And it seems that the EC believes that the IAHR must dominate the field and will only be able to accomplish that by, first, giving up its original objective of simply extending its original goal of globalizing the scientific approach to the study of religion – that is, by giving up its prior restrictive aim to "promote and carve out more and more space all over the globe for the academic, scientific, analytical, historical, cross-cultural study of religion"[26] – and second, by incorporating many more national member associations and societies from a wide and diverse range of disciplines and methodological approaches to the study of religion, which will greatly increase the IAHR's wealth and therefore its influence on the field,[27] and which can be achieved only if the IAHR adopts an inclusivist model for the study of religion.

In her new introduction to the Scenarios document for use by the International Committee (IC) at the (subsequently cancelled) 2020 IAHR congress in Otago, New Zealand, Fujiwara insists that the EC is obligated to "developing concrete suggestions for Otago as to how to change the IAHR in light of [what she calls] past efforts and current challenges."[28] In discussion about this with Jensen, they appear to have come to a peculiar agreement that "it would be good to show 3 or 4 Scenarios to the IC in Otago" but also that "the EC should present one single recommendation"…[29] They do not, however, appear to have articulated what that single recommendation is.

There is no clear indication, no public announcement that the EC has adopted one of the three scenarios/models for the academic study of religion that they are willing to recommend to the IC. Nevertheless, given its timidness in referring to the current (exclusivist Werblowskian) approach to the study of religion presented in the first framing document (Scenario/Model A), and its explicit rejection, along with Scenario/Model B (exclusivist, and even more strictly scientific) in the second and third framing documents, it seems as though the "one single recommendation" the EC would be likely to pass on to the IC would be for the IAHR to adopt the inclusivist Scenario/Model C. It would be disingenuous to deny this simply because the EC has not publicly declared that it has done so. And with that said, even a superficial reading of Scenario/Model C will show that I have not falsely claimed that the EC appears to promote theological, normative,

26 *Ibid*., 235.
27 *Ibid*., 307.
28 *Ibid*., 308
29 *Ibid*., 305.

and applied studies of religion by expressly including them as legitimate activities and 'complementary' (whatever that means) epistemic enterprises in the academic study of religion. Not for a moment, that is, is the EC ready to limit membership in the future they envision for the IAHR "to those who approach it as an anthropological [strictly scientific] discipline."[30] Rather, as they put it, they will give priority "to developing and *promoting* scholarly reflexivity to the study of religion in diverse contexts around the world":[31]

1. By explaining that a reflexive approach involves being able to "distinguish between types of scholarship"[32]; by recognizing that "a more comprehensive understanding of the academic study of religion … [and, therefore, that IAHR congresses] may include high quality theological, normative, and applied papers and sessions so designed"[33]; by "understanding the differences between acceptable theological, normative, and activist papers and naively confessional and apologetic papers,"[34] and by accepting "only the highest quality papers [at IAHR conferences and congresses, divided] into the theological, normative, and applied tracks".[35]
2. By being able to tackle "global and social challenges"[36] and being able to "[n]etwork with political bodies to insist on the social relevance of the study of religion".[37]
3. By being able to "receive funds from religious bodies" for these activities (so long as they receive such funds from more than just one religious body).[38]
4. By encouraging and supporting "the establishment of national associations that are open to a reflexive approach to the study of religion".[39]
5. By choosing a name that is "most inclusive"[40] and that will allow the IAHR to "compete more effectively with other more inclusive associations".[41]

What remains a mystery is that the EC had agreed to send on to the IC three proposals or motions, not one, with the recommendation that they send them on to the General Assembly (GA) at the 2020 IAHR quinquennial congress. I think the "one single recommendation" that Jensen, Fujiwara, and the EC have failed (or refused) to articulate lies implicit in the proposals they have explicitly formulated. If this is not the case, it makes no sense for the EC to have gone to all the bother of organizing such

30 *Ibid*., 322.
31 *Ibid*., 322.
32 *Ibid*., 324.
33 *Ibid*., 325.
34 *Ibid*., 326.
35 *Ibid*., 328.
36 *Ibid*., 328.
37 *Ibid*., 327.
38 *Ibid*., 328.
39 *Ibid*., 323.
40 *Ibid*., 324.
41 *Ibid*., 325.

an elaborate meeting in Delphi, and to incur considerable expense in doing so, for the meagre results represented in the publicly stated conclusions they reached at the end of it all.

A Hidden Proposal?

Until the present time the EC has explicitly resolved to forward to the IC only the following three innocuous-looking proposals for approval by the GA at the IAHR's next quinquennial congress in 2025:[42]

1 The proposal to change the name of the International Association for the History of Religions to the International Association for the Study of Religion (IASR).
2 The proposal to insert 'scientific' into the IAHR's Constitution.
3 The proposal to change the rules for hosting IAHR special and regional conferences [which, however, are left unspecified].

It is difficult to see how the first proposal, to change the name of the Association to that of "the Study of Religion", can function to solidify the IAHR's scientific status. Whereas 'IAHR' provides specific information about the kind of intellectual activity in which members of the Association are engaged (i.e., scientific historiography), the proposed new title, 'International Association for the Study of Religion,' which substitutes "Study of Religion" for "History of Religions", is so generic and amorphous as to be without any epistemic or methodological import.[43] Although the EC is aware that past IAHR executive and international committees have for these reasons refused to consider such a change of name for the Association, it is, as the Scenarios document points out, the most appropriate name for the culturally inclusivist future the current EC envisions for the IAHR.

Given the first proposal, the second, to insert 'scientific' into the IAHR's constitution, appears to provide specific information about the kind of intellectual activity in which members of the Association presently claim to be engaged. One normally would expect to find such infor-

42 Fujiwara, however, informed members of the IAHR that "it will be left to the discretion of the incoming Executive Committee [not the Delphi EC] whether or not to submit the same proposals to the International Committee" (see "IAHR Acting Secretary General's Report 2015-2020" in Satoko Fujiwara, *IAHR Bulletin* 41, Tokyo: IAHR 2020, <https://www.iahrweb.org/bulletins/bulletin41.pdf>, 25. 7. 2020 [4. 9. 2023], 5). I have seen no indication that this matter has been decided by the 'new' (2020 to 2025) EC.

43 As Professor Tom Lawson put it to me: "The decision to employ 'study' rather than 'scientific study' simply fails to constrain the basis for the organization. It simply opens the gates to any form of intellectual activity including poetry" (personal communication, 26. 9. 2022).

mation in the title of the Association, as with 'History' in "International Association for the History of Religions," but the EC and EEC refused to consider putting 'science' or 'scientific' into the title of the Association. The second proposal, therefore, is in tension, if not open conflict, with the first, which proposes to amend the title of the Association to the "Study of Religion" which is clearly open to alternative methodologies that claim to transcend scientific boundaries. One might wonder, therefore, whether the EC thought it was politic, so to speak, to insert 'scientific' into the constitution of the IAHR in order not to raise suspicion about the EC's real intent regarding the IAHR's future.

The third proposal, to change the rules for hosting IAHR special and regional conferences, seems to concern only the quotidian affairs of the Association. This change, moreover, hardly needs formal approval from the International Committee and General Assembly of the Association. It would be odd indeed for the Association to be able to make critical organizational and administrative changes to its operation only once every five years. This proposal, therefore, has no relevance to the EC's ultimate objective of recreating the IAHR.

The odd, if not incoherent, character of these three proposals, individually and collectively, ought to raise eyebrows. The objective of the Delphi meeting was to reflect on the long-term future of the IAHR, and the EC had created the Extended EC to help them 'envision' that future. But those proposals simply do not coherently map that vision. It is the adoption of inclusivist Model C of the Scenarios document that will do the main work of opening up the IAHR to moral, political, theological and other extra-scientific objectives and agendas and that will make of the IAHR the omnibus organization that will then appropriately be called the IASR.

I will now show that a 'fourth proposal' lies implicit in the "Suggested Main Themes and Reading Resources" document;[44] that it is clearly formulated (in its negative import) in Deputy Secretary General, Professor Ann Taves's Delphi presentation "A Discussion on the Future of the Study of Religion";[45] and that it is stated positively in the "IAHR Scenarios: 2020 and Beyond" document (with Taves as one of its chief architects).[46] Were it explicitly articulated it would read something like this:

> A proposal to make the IAHR globally competitive in the field of 'religious studies' by jettisoning its current strictly scientific intellectual objectives as parochial and exclusivist, and by adopting for the IAHR an inclusivist model of the field that is multi-focused and able to include theological, moral, political and other normative

44 D. Wiebe, *An Argument*…, 231-252.
45 *Ibid*., 277-297.
46 *Ibid*., 299-330.

> and practical concerns related to existential issues and questions of the meaning of human existence.

This presumptive proposal assumes the possibility of an accord between the scientific study of religion and the epistemic and methodological commitments of theology and other 'reflexive' and normative intellectual enterprises.

In the above-mentioned "Suggested Main Themes and Reading Resources" document, the first of the three framing documents prepared by the EC for the Delphi meeting, the IAHR President and Secretary General raised the following question:

> … [D]o 'we' the participants to the meeting in Delphi, and thus the current EC too, actually agree that the Werblowsky Marburg 1960 statement [i.e., his basic minimum presuppositions for the academic study of religion] is still a useful starting point for an agreement or consensus of what constitutes … the 'corporate identity' of the IAHR?[47]

It is strange for them to have done so, however, since it is expected of IAHR officers and all members serving on the EC to function within the IAHR framework as set out in the Constitution. Furthermore, they continue by questioning whether "we [are] ready to stand up for and defend this point of departure for the kind of academic and scientific approach promoted by the IAHR as well as the linked understanding of the *raison d'être* of the IAHR."[48]

Ann Taves, in her essay "The Future of the Study of Religion," which effectively functioned as the second of the framing documents for the Delphi discussions, answered that question bluntly in the negative. She maintained, without opposition from other officers and members of the EC, that "the chief problem [for the IAHR] is not the continuing resistance of religiously-oriented scholars to a scientific agenda, but our parochialism [exclusivism] as a discipline."[49]

In "IAHR Scenarios: 2020 and Beyond," the final framing document for the Delphi discussions, with Taves as one of its major authors, the EC argued for, and ultimately adopted, an 'inclusivist' model for the study of religion for the IAHR's 'corporate' identity described in detail in Section C of "Scenarios."[50] And having effectively ousted the role of the 'basic minimum presuppositions' as characterizing the Association's 'corporate identity', and ensuring room for "theological, normative, and applied stud-

47 This makes about as much sense as elected officials in a democratic state seeking to undermine the 'corporate identity' of the country as a democracy.
48 D. Wiebe, *An Argument*…., 237.
49 *Ibid*., 280.
50 *Ibid*., 306, 322-329.

ies of religion"[51] as part of its 'mandate,' the EC needed a name that would be "most inclusive"[52] to suit the character of the wholly new omnibus organization they were in the process of creating in Delphi. The generic and amorphous name of 'International Association for the *Study* of Religion' was the perfect fit.

It should now be clear that the proposal for the change of name of the Association from 'history of religions' to 'study of religion' presupposes prior acceptance of something like proposal four described above. Although such a proposal lies implicit in the documents that framed the Delphi discussions, it was never acknowledged, or explicitly presented to the EEC for discussion and debate, or, it appears, consciously and formally approved by the EC in its post-Delphi deliberations and published in the IAHR *Bulletins, Bulletin Supplements*, or *e-Bulletin Supplements.* All individual and national association members of the IAHR should know, therefore, that if the IAHR's proposal to change the name of the Association to 'International Association for the Study of Religion' is adopted by the General Assembly at the next IAHR quinquennial congress, the scientific study of religion as 'founded' by the historians of religion in Paris in 1900, institutionally structured as the IAHR in Amsterdam in 1950, and reaffirmed by adopting the Werblowskian statement of 'basic minimum presuppositions' for the study of religion in Marburg in 1960 will be no more – it will have been transformed into something very much like Ninian Smart's proposal for a World Academy of Religion.[53] Honesty and integrity on the part of the IAHR leadership, therefore, requires something like 'proposal four,' as spelled out above, to be presented to, and approved by, the International Committee since it describes what the EC hoped to create in Delphi. And if approved by the IC, the IC must ensure that the General Assembly is clearly aware of the full import of what it will be asked to agree to – regarding the future of the IAHR as an omnibus intellectual organization – at its next quinquennial congress.[54]

51 *Ibid*., 324, Section C2, 325, Sections C3.1-C3.2.

52 *Ibid*., 324, Section C2.

53 See Ninian Smart, "Concluding Reflections: Religious Studies in Global Perspective", in: Ursula King (ed.), *Turning Point in Religious Studies: Essays in Honour of Geoffrey Parrinder*, Edinburgh: T and T Clark 1999, 299-306.

54 The next quinquennial congress of the IAHR will be held at Jagiellonian University in Krakow, Poland, 24-30 August 2025 (S. Fujiwara, *IAHR e-Bulletin*…, 1).

SUMMARY

Should the IAHR Seek a 'Science' Peculiar to Its Community of Scholars?

I have two objectives in this paper. The first is to show that the Executive Committee (EC) of the International Association for the History of Religions (IAHR) was intent on nothing less than a wholesale transformation of the Association at the special meeting on the future of the IAHR held in Delphi in 2019. The framing documents for these deliberations focused on the rejection of the strictly scientific study of religion as described in the basic minimum presuppositions for the field that the IAHR had adopted at its World Congress in Marburg in 1960. The EC in Delphi decided to recommend a change of name of the IAHR to the generic and amorphous "International Association for the Study of Religion" with an inclusive mandate open to theological, normative, and applied studies of religion. The cancellation of the 2020 World Congress prevented this from being approved by the General Assembly. In response to subsequent opposition to the proposal, the EC has announced that it will not take the change-of-name proposal forward to the International Committee in 2025. But they have clearly not abandoned their objective of re-creating the IAHR. Hence my second objective: to raise concern about the EC's decision to hold a special adjunct study conference in conjunction with the 2023 meeting of the International Committee. Their search for a "science" peculiar to the IAHR community appears suspiciously like an alternative route to their original Delphi objective.

Keywords: IAHR; scientific study of religion; future of IAHR

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