movement. After Haines joined the movement, his mother was understandably concerned as a result of widespread media misinformation. Haines personal reflection commended Inform for their work in supporting concerned relatives through the provision of unbiased and factually correct information about the Unification movement.

The second panel platformed various academics who have engaged with Inform over its thirty-five years of operation. First to speak was Professor Milda Alisauskiene. Marking her initial interactions with Inform as a "turning point" in her academic career, Alisauskiene detailed how Professor Barker's agreement to supervise her master's thesis cemented Barker as a role model in her life. Within an event which had so far highlighted Inform's importance in a British context, this speech branched explored Inform's global relevance. Alisauskiene remarked on Barker's constant academic communication with the Lithuanian Centre for New Religions Research and Information, to demonstrate how inspirational Barker's forethought has been in the creation of like-groups worldwide. The next speaker was Susannah Crockford, who originally came to Inform to consult its database, yet eventually became an Inform staff member after being inspired by the interactions with members of the public via the phone lines. It was these conversations that, for Crockford, emphasised how imperative Inform's work is in manufacturing spaces which don't ridicule members of NRMs, and take people and their testimonies seriously. Next to speak was Professor Abby Day, who reflected on her upbringing in the heart of North American cultic discourse of figures such as Jim Jones and Charles Manson. Highlighting the demystifying power of Inform's services, Day reflected on how these people were deemed "strange" because they were "made strange by those in established religions who wanted to view themselves as more authentic or established." The 'academics' panel closed with Professor Jean La Fontaine, who gratefully reflected on Inform's capacity in making her academic research into 'satanic panic' a reality, effectively turning something which "sounded like a dangerous or ridiculous" idea into an approachable task.

The penultimate panel of the day saw several professional speakers detail the ways in which they, or the communities they have attended on behalf of, have benefitted directly from the services provided by Inform. First to speak was Revd Pedr Beckley, who accentuated the applicability of Inform's work and services in all faith communities. Following Beckley was Henri de Cordes, the former President of Belgium's CIAOSN, an organisation which acts as a junior sibling to the "grown-up" Inform. De Cordes specified how the two organisations have existed as key players in a mutually beneficial academic microcosm. The next speaker was retired civil servant Hugh Marriage. As an instrumental figure in the securing of Inform's first government grants, Marriage detailed how his own department within the Home Office which was initially responsible for 'cult' management was grossly underinformed – until Inform became involved in an advisory position. As a member of the Estonian Ministry of the Interior with twenty-five years of history with Inform, Ringo Ringvee then emulated Marriage's experience in an international context. Retired solicitor Kim Speller then highlighted how he had personally sought the informed testimonies of several Inform members to aid in numerous childcare cases concerning wardship in the wider familial context of a New Religious Movement. This panel closed with the words of Jim Walters, director of the LSE Faith Centre. With the aid of Inform, Walters highlighted how he is now able to appreciate the complex intersectionality of the ways "big religion" can inform "small religion," and vice versa. This panel was both necessary and enlightening in terms of contextualising Inform in spheres that lie outside of academia.

The final panel was delivered online, and saw three American scholars beam into the proceedings. The first of these was Gordon Melton, who stressed the importance of fieldwork in religious studies, claiming that it is amongst the worst of trends in modern religious studies to neglect its importance. Susan Palmer then spoke of the equal status that Inform gives to members of NRMs alongside academics and officials, thus providing a space for product conversation to take place. The last speaker was Catherine Wessinger, who echoed many of the sentiments expressed throughout the day.

Wessinger's speech concluded with a personal plea to both Melton and Barker to write and reflect collaboratively on "the influence they've had over NRMs behind the scenes." Wessinger praised the organisation for the important work that it has done, and will continue to do.

Inform's 35th anniversary seminar proved to be an event which was as inspiring as it was honorary of both Professor Barker and Inform itself, accurately managing to balance a reverence for the established legacy of the charity and optimistic postulation as to what Inform may go on to become over its next thirty-five years of existence. It is thanks to the enlightening, touching, and often humorous tales of those in attendance that the legacy of Professor Barker and Inform could be properly honoured and celebrated, in an event that truly highlighted Inform as a meeting place for open, productive conversation between academics and those associated with a range of New Religious Movements.

Erin Clark
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IAHR SPECIAL CONFERENCE UNIVERSITY OF TOKYO, DECEMBER 2023

"Can the IAHR be engaged and relevant without being political or confessional? The position of "science (wissenschaft)" in 2023."

This conference was convened in response to three recent debates within the IAHR—the ongoing debate regarding updating the constitution and potentially the name of the IAHR in light of developments since the Marburg statement of 1960; the resulting debate about the relationship between the study of religion and different conceptions of "science"; and the recent statement in support of the Ukrainian Association, an unprecedented political intervention from the association. Details of the first two points, including discussion of the debates to date, can be found in previous BASR Bulletin issues 140 (June 2022, 12-13) and 139 (November 2021, 17-20), as well as the IAHR e-Bulletin Supplement (November 2019). I'm sure that readers will forgive me for not rehashing the sometimes-heated debate again here, beyond the necessary background context.

The conference opened with welcome addresses from IAHR President Tim Jensen and Satoko Fujiwara, Secretary General of the IAHR and President of the Japanese Association (JARS), and who also organised the conference. This was followed by the keynote from Nancy Cartwright—not the one from The Simpsons, the one from Durham University who is President of the International Union of History and Philosophy of Science and Technology. Her presentation, "Objectivity, Values and Commitment in Science" (presented remotely, though with numerous slides) was a masterful overview of the current position(s) of philosophers of science in regard to "objectivity", "positivism" and "science", and how different disciplines (both STEM and social science) are grappling with similar issues to Religious Studies.

Two questions in particular came to the fore. First, is science singular, or plural? Cartwright explained that in her field, "today, virtually no-one believes that there is a purely formal scientific method", and introduced us to three of the most significant contemporary approaches to understanding how much we can actually know about material reality. Scientific Perspectivism, associated with Ronald Giere, attempts to mediate between objectivism and constructivism by arguing that while claims can be true in a qualified and conditional sense, they cannot be proven in any absolute sense, as rather they are always properties of the interaction between the material world and human observers. Pragmatic Realism, associated with Hasok Chang, agrees that universal truths about material reality are impossible, and proposes a practice-based approach based on what we do with science in which a statement can be considered true to the extent that it works coherently with other activities to achieve our aims. As such, knowledge is regarded as an ability rather than something that one simply possesses. Lastly, Standpoint Theory, associated with philosopher of science Alison Wylie, argues that knowledge production is situ-

ated within a hierarchical structure of power relations, and is conducted by individuals whose experience and social context shapes what they know and how they know it. Yet marginalized groups (the "outsiders within") can have an epistemic advantage by offering perspectives that challenge dominant paradigms, thus contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the world. It was enlightening to see that other disciplines are wrestling with the same questions, but as I have been arguing for a few years now, as a discipline framing itself as a science, and dealing with claims about "belief", "faith", even "Truth", Religious Studies is long overdue in addressing our epistemic contradictions and evasions. It was encouraging therefore to hear these issues being directly addressed in responses from Jeppe Jensen (Aarhus) from a critical perspective, and Kevin Schilbrack (Appalachian State) from the perspective of philosophy of religion.

The Roundtable Session at the end of the first day included a speaker from every continent bar Antarctica, representing the USA, Mexico, South Africa, Bangladesh, Japan and the UK. Each was asked to give a ten-minute presentation addressing any combination of the conferences key questions as they saw fit. What was remarkable was how much agreement and overlap there was between the papers, given that there was no prior coordination between them. Amy Allocco, from Elon University, North Carolina, discussed how the AAR have sponsored initiatives designed to promote the positive effects of religious diversity, as well as making political statements, so long as they advance their mission to enhance the public understanding of religion. Blanca Solares Altamirano, from the National Autonomous University of Mexico, reflected on the roots of the IAHR in the Eranos circle, and asked how the study of religion might contribute to understanding "the spiritual crisis or loss of meaning in our days?"

Denzil Chetty, from the University of South Africa, delivered for me the standout paper, addressing "knowledge inequalities and its situational dynamics" from the perspective of the Global South. Whose knowledge, whose science, does the study of religion qua science defend? Prof. Shahnaj Jahan, from the University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh, talked about approaching the question as an archaeologist, where the focus on material objects means that there is little space for confessional concerns. The problem is not the name, she argued, but that we must be firmer with our colleagues on this position, and better at communicating it to the public. And so, I felt more confident in arguing in my paper that, whatever else it may be, religion is a political term, and that the critical turn is essential to globalising the study of religion and making space for other knowledge formations. The final presenter was Shusuke Yamane, now of the National Institute of Technology, Maizuru College, Japan. A graduate of the so-called Kyoto School of the philosophy of religion, who argued vehemently against the inclusion of the word "science" into the constitution, Dr Yamane drew on William James to argue against this, for a more pragmatic theory of truth.

The second day began with an open panel of papers. This was a somewhat eclectic and uneven selection, with some presentations wildly misjudged in terms of content, level and political rhetoric. But there was a superb presentation from IAHR Treasurer, Andrea Rota, entitled "Neutral. All too Neutral? Contemporary (?) Challenges in the Study of Religion". Echoing the panel of delegates from the previous afternoon (again, without planning), he called for "a decolonial theory of religion" approached as an "ecology of knowledge", and laid out three methodological maxims to achieve this: 1) axiological neutrality (excluding evaluative value judgements), 2) methodological naturalism (which to me seems clearer and more accurate than "methodological agnosticism"); and 3) "suspension of truth statements".

After lunch, the final panel was work-in-progress presentations from PhD candidates at the University of Tokyo's Religion department. Aya Oba introduced their research among monks using a Death Studies approach. Aki Murakami presented fascinating research looking at the relationship between RS and Buddhist theology in Japan—which had striking parallels with the UK situation. Mina Lee was next, presenting her research among Jewish communities in Korean ghettos. She was also brave enough to directly refer to Gaza, which shamefully few of her more secure colleagues were. Hiroki Tanaka gave an impressively theoretically sophisticated presentation comparing secularism in France and Japan, with a focus on public scholarship and anti-cult rhetoric. Ikuo Tsuboko closed with an eloquent presentation on the relationship between "scientific" and "confessional" studies, focussing on the work of Charles Taylor. The standard of the presentations was high across the board, speaking to the quality of teaching in the faculty.

This was followed by the International Committee Meeting (the contents of which we will leave to the IAHR Bulletin to relay), and the conference closed. But for the international delegates, the organising committee had arranged two trips, beginning the following morning—a one-day tour of sites in Tokyo, and a three-day tour to Kyoto. For those staying in Tokyo, our attentive student guides took us to several Shinto shrines, including the Meiji Jingu shrine, dedicated to the Meiji royal family, where we were given an excellent personalised tour by a Shinto priest, the beautiful Tsukiji Honganji Pure Land Buddhist Temple whose fittings and architecture mixed Indian and Japanese motifs, and the bustling Sensoji Temple, by the famous Kaminarimon Gate and Nakamise shopping street, where we were taken into the inner temple by the priests. Perhaps the highlight, however, was a visit to the headquarters of Soka Gakkai International, where we were treated to lunch, a presentation on the group's peace lobbying and an audience with SGI Director General for Peace and Global Issues Hirotsugu Terasaki. While the atmosphere was more akin to a corporate boardroom meeting than temple, we were all impressed by Terasaki's direct but measured answers to our questions.

The group that went on the three-day Kyoto trip, led by Professor Satoko Fujiwara and assisted by several students, took the train past a stunning view of Mount Fuji and visited mainly a wide selection of different Buddhist sites, including the famed Golden Pavilion (Kinkaku-ji), seeing different styles of gardens (water, moss and dry), as well as a temple complex with an impressive collection of bonzai trees. Some Buddhist sites embraced new technology in the form of an 'android' bodhisattva (Kannon) speaking lines from the Heart Sutra and small Buddhas attached to drones inspired by raigō paintings depicting the descent of Amida Buddha on a purple cloud to take deceased believers to the Western Paradise. There was such a variety, even between different Pure Land groups, making it impossible to characterise Japanese Buddhism as a whole.

A full transcript of the international panel will be published in a forthcoming IAHR eBulletin, and the conference proceedings will form the basis of a future volume of Equinox's IAHR Book Series.

David G. Robertson with Suzanne Owen.