
EASR Conference. Introduction¹

«The chosen theme, *Religion in the History of European Culture*, aims to encourage debate on the role played by the religious phenomenon in the long and diversified cultural history of Europe. At the same time – in line with the aims of the EASR – the intention is to emphasise how the formation and development of the History of religions, as a scientific discipline, has been specifically influenced by its “European identity”. In terms of comparative methodology and its definition of the subject “religion”, the discipline is in fact the result of academic movements which arose and developed within the environment of European culture in the 17th century, although with significant forerunners in previous centuries and in the Greek and Roman world.

Since 2009 marks the 50th anniversary of the death of Raffaele Pettazzoni, founder of the SISR, and co-founder and President of the IAHR, a section of the Conference will be dedicated to assessing his scholarship and role in the history of the discipline».

This was how I presented the goals of the Conference held in Messina from 14 to 17 September 2009 in extending – on behalf of the Società italiana di Storia delle religioni (SISR) – the invitation to all the members of the European Association for the Study of Religions (EASR) to take part in the 9th EASR Annual Conference which, thanks to the agreement with the IAHR (International Association for the History of Religions) President Rosalind Hackett and the IAHR General Secretary, Tim Jensen, was also an IAHR Special Conference.

To exemplify this goal and indicate the fundamental lines along which the theme proposed could be organised, at the same time I established a number of particular fields, in turn divided according to chronological criteria, and circumscribed specific issues, although leaving individual scholars or groups of scholars free to identify and discuss in depth aspects of this general theme, which could be developed in many directions. The project was thus arranged according to five main sections, establishing the «Suggested topics to which Panels and Papers may relate»:

¹ Questo testo introduce anche altre iniziative editoriali riguardanti gli atti del congresso.

1. “Religious Europe” in the Mediterranean context: between Asia and Africa. Contacts and influences
 - a) Antiquity and Late Antiquity
 - b) the Middle Ages
 - c) the Modern Age
 - d) the Contemporary Age
2. The history of the “History of Religions”
 - a) A European “invention”?
 - b) Reflections on the religious phenomenon and theories of culture
 - c) Methodologies and theories on the origin and nature of religion: the contribution of European culture and the current scientific debate
3. Meeting and conflicts between peoples and cultures; the role of religions in the European scenario. From antiquity to the present day
4. Europe: centre for the “diffusion” of religious traditions and pole of “attraction”. From antiquity to the present day
5. The role and contribution of a “European Association for the Study of Religions” (EASR) within the world scenario of the IAHR: reflections and observations on a decade of experience
6. Raffaele Pettazoni: an Italian scholar in the international context of the IAHR.

This project was welcomed by the academic world both in Europe and further afield, with many participants from all the national societies belonging to the EASR as well as others from USA, Canada, Brazil, South Africa, Japan, Australia, Israel, Turkey.

Of particular significance were the talks given by the speakers in the Plenary Sessions, agreed between myself and the Colleagues who generously accepted my invitation to discuss wide-ranging themes, also providing material and stimulus for the contributions of the other participants. These talks are published in the second issue of the Journal «*Historia Religionum*» (2010), thanks to the generosity of its Editor, Prof. Giovanni Filoramo, who, in his capacity as member of the Executive Committee of the SISR, shared and supported the initiative of the Conference from the beginning.

Even merely listing the titles of the General Papers allows us to perceive the wealth and exceptional variety of the issues connected to the theme proposed, which the Messina Conference tackled from various points of view and with the contribution of a wide range of experience and methods. Following the order of the papers presented over the intense days of the Conference, I note that attention focused on issues of a methodological nature and at the same time of peculiar historical importance, such as that dealt with by Armin W. Geertz of the University of Aarhus, Denmark (*Religion, Cognition and Culture: A European Idea?*, published in «HR» 2[2010], pp. 21-38) as *Too much*

Mind and not enough Brain, Body and Culture. On what needs to be done in the Cognitive Science of Religion), an important voice in the current methodological debate taking place within the discipline, that from the field of the Cognitive Science of Religion, of which Armin W. Geertz is one of the most active representatives. In fact, he heads a research unit at Aarhus University called Religion, Cognition and Culture (RCC). In presenting this unit and the aims of his paper at the Messina Conference, the scholar stated that: «It was originally designated as a special research area by the Faculty of Theology at the University and is currently in the process of being integrated as a full-fledged research unit in the Department of the Study of Religion. The RCC is closely integrated with university-wide conglomerates in Aarhus, such as the research initiative *MINDLab*, the Center for Functionally Integrative Neuroscience (CFIN), and the Cognition, Communication, and Culture (CCC) network, all consisting of researchers from the humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, health sciences, the university hospitals and the psychiatric hospital. In a recent statement developed by the RCC, we assume that humans are simultaneously biological and cultural beings. In hominin history these two aspects of human biology and human culture have never been separate. Each newborn human is both unfinished and uniquely equipped, biologically and cognitively organized to flourish in socio-cultural environments that its genes could never anticipate. All this matters to explanations for how religious minds function. So a perspective on minds not limited to brains is required. Thus we must approach cognition as embodied and distributed. We must analyze religion by studying the functional organization of the human brain, its interaction with the social and cultural worlds that it inhabits and modifies, and its developmental constraints and flexibility. Humans are mental creatures as well as embodied agents, who interact with the world. Core features of cognition – for example our moral intuitions, social intelligence and epistemic hunger – are powered by interpersonal dynamics. Cognition happens not only inside heads, but between heads, among heads and without heads (i.e. in cultural artifacts and systems)» (*Programme and Abstracts*, Messina 2009, p. 7).

The paper by Enrico Montanari (University of Rome “La Sapienza”) introduced the discussion on the scientific identity of Raffaele Pettazzoni, to whose activity, on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of his death, the SISR intended to pay homage. In fact, a large section of the works of the Conference, in line with the general plan, was occupied by a Panel, full of contributions on the entire span of the scholar’s intense activity (*Raffaele Pettazzoni: an Italian Scholar in the International Context of the IAHR*). Organised by Prof. Giovanni

Casadio, it included many papers which will be published in an issue of the review *Studi e Materiali di Storia delle Religioni* (2011), founded by the master of religious-historical studies in Italy.

The paper by Enrico Montanari (*Comparative Method and Historico-Religious "Commitment": the Concept of "Secular Faith" in R. Pettazzoni*, published in «HR» 2[2010], pp. 39-60) as *Il concetto di 'fede laica' in Raffaele Pettazzoni. Verso una "religione dello Stato"*), explored a particular dimension of the scholar's cultural horizon, in which, precisely with *the Concept of "Secular Faith"*, the sum of his scholarly interests converges in a personal *Religious "Commitment"*. In E. Montanari's presentation we read: «Pettazzoni's historicist conception is not non-religious nor irreligious: it proposes a "secular faith" in a "religion of this world", and therefore it is presented as a "third way" between Catholic faith and secular agnosticism, defined "defeatist". This "secular faith", recognizable in some trends of thought between the 19th and the 20th century, also includes history of religions as a way of worldly "salvation": this is a perspective, in a way, comparable to M. Eliade's conception (history of religions considered as "saving discipline"), though different for contents and aims. During the fifties, Pettazzoni defined in a better way the outlines of his "secular faith", connecting it with a "sacralization of the profane", considered as a religious valorization of working and precisely as a redemption characteristic of the *condition humaine* (Malraux). Another source of his thought is a reflection on the legacy of polytheism, understood not in the recent neo-pagan deformations, but in a recall (of classicist origin) of values which are constitutive of the "civic" dimension of modern society. This "religious" commitment of Pettazzoni doesn't privilege religion as a category compared to the "categories of the spirit" fixed by Croce, nor it excludes it. In Pettazzoni, "religious history" is an ineliminable ingredient of the history of civilizations, along with the history of arts, of economy, of philosophy, etc. In this sense, through the proposal of a "religion of the State", dialectically compared with a "religion of Man", the concept of religion appears to be broadened and not reduced, removed or nullified (according to the outlines of an "absolute historicism"): in this way, it makes easier the elaboration of an inclusive "historical science of religions", which is compatible and complementary with a perspective of "phenomenological" type» (*Programme and Abstracts*, Messina 2009, pp. 8-9).

I asked Tim Jensen (University of Southern Denmark, Odense, Denmark), an old friend, having been General Secretary of the EASR since its foundation and thus in the years when I was President, to take on an important task which he was more than qualified to perform. In fact, elected General Secretary of the IAHR on the occasion of the

Congress of Tokyo in 2005, he still holds this office and was thus “predestined” to present talk on the theme *The EASR within the World Scenario of the IAHR 2000-2009. Observations and Reflections*, published in «HR» 2[2010], pp. 61-90) as *The EASR within (the World Scenario of) the IAHR 2000-2009. Observations and Reflections*. He performed this task with lively enthusiasm, as well as great expertise, thanks to his experience “in the field”. His observations gave us an insight into the central issues of a wide-ranging academic experience which involves the international panorama of our discipline. I am very grateful to the scholar and friend for his kindly acknowledgement of the role of the Italian school of History of Religions and in particular of the scholarly tradition in Messina in the brief but intense life of the EASR: «There are other (good) reasons – he wrote («HR» 2[2010], pp. 61-62) – why I, and maybe the hosts, conceived of the 2009 Messina Conference as an appropriate place for a celebration of EASR’s 10th anniversary.

One such good reason is linked to the central role Giulia S. Gasparro and Messina played in regard to the birth, beginnings and well-being of the EASR: Prof. Gasparro was, together with another active supporter of the EASR as well as of the IAHR, G. Casadio, amongst the founding ‘fathers’ in Cracow 2000, and Prof. Gasparro furthermore was elected the first President of the EASR². What’s more: Gasparro and the Cattedra di Storia delle Religioni at the University of Messina, in March 2001 hosted a symposium on *Themes and Problems in the History of Religions in Contemporary Europe*. A theme, thus, not totally unlike the themes of the 2000 Cracow and 2009 Messina conferences³.

Equally important is the fact that this symposium in Messina served as venue for the first business meeting, March 30, 2001, of the EASR Committee. At this meeting the membership of the EASR to the IAHR (effectuated at the IAHR Congress in Durban, August 2000) and its legal registration in The Hague was ascertained, and discussions regarding the first regular EASR Annual (Cambridge, UK, 10-13 September 2001) and the first regular elections were conducted.

Messina, thus, was central to the birth and beginnings of the EASR, and the (similar) themes of the mentioned three conferences also made

² G. Sfameni Gasparro (together with M. Pye), also became one of the two first honorary Life Members of the EASR. Gasparro (and Pye too) is also an IAHR Honorary Life Member.

³ Contributions to the symposium appeared in 2002 in G. Sfameni Gasparro, *Themes and Problems of the History of Religions in Contemporary Europe. Proceedings of the International Seminar Messina, March 30-31, 2001. Temi e problemi della Storia delle Religioni nell’Europa contemporanea. Atti del seminario Internazionale Messina, 30-31 Marzo 2001*, Edizioni Lionello Giordano, Cosenza 2002, the first publication pertaining to the EASR.

Messina an obvious place for a celebration of the birth and first decennium of the EASR.

Besides: the role of Italian scholarship, of the *Società italiana di storia delle religioni*, and of individual legendary scholars such as R. Pettazoni and U. Bianchi in the history of the IAHR can hardly be overestimated. The Congresses in Rome 1955 and 1990, but also the 1966 IAHR study conference in Messina on “The Origins of Gnosticism”, are milestones in the IAHR history. With Rome 1955 as the place for the adoption of the very name of the IAHR⁴, and Rome 1990 as the place for the vital discussions on the very notion of “religion”, – as well as for the beginnings of discussions, culminating in Mexico City 1995, on a possible change of name, from the IAHR to The International Association for the Academic Study of Religions, a change that did not come about⁵» («HR» 2[2010], pp. 61-62).

Prof. Jörg Rüpke (University of Erfurt, Germany) offered a vivid picture of some fundamental issues of religious history in the Mediterranean in antiquity and late antiquity (*Hellenistic and Roman Empires and Euro-Mediterranean Religion*, published in «HR» 2[2010], pp. 91-102 as *Wann begann die Europäische Religionsgeschichte? Der hellenistisch-römische Mittelmeerraum und die europäische Gegenwart*), one of the classic themes of the history of religions, now reassessed in the light of burgeoning documentation and new interpretative models. The scholar described the aim of his paper thus: «The history of religion in the classical period has for various reasons been classified as part, prehistory or left behind of the history of religion of Europe. This paper will briefly address the formation of an Euro-Mediterranean political and cultural space (with its many contacts beyond) and inquire into the characteristics of a religious “koine” within that cultural space. I will argue that “religion” itself underwent important changes throughout this period, leading to a form of religion that would be formative for later periods, too. Apart from legal and organizational features, pride of place is given to the space accorded to individual religious practices and concepts of legitimate and deviant religious actions. Here, the paper will concentrate on developments between the age of Cicero and late antiquity. Changes in terminology will be analyzed as well as the

⁴ The name of the organization founded in Amsterdam in 1950 was I.A.S.H.R., the International Association for the Study of the History of Religions. Cf. *Proceedings of the 7th Congress for the History of Religions, Amsterdam 1950*, C.J.C. Bleeker-G.W.J. Drewes-K.A.H. Hidding (eds.), North-Holland Publishing Company, Amsterdam 1951, p. 26 (now Amsterdam 1950 Proceedings); «Numen» II(1955), p. 236.

⁵ Cf. *Religion and Society: Proceedings of the 17th Quinquennial Congress of the International Association for the History of Religions (iahr)*, Y. González Torres-M. Pye (eds.), Roots and Branches, Cambridge 2003, pp. 155-156

argumentation in treatises “On superstition” and the like (e.g. Cicero, Seneca, Plutarch, Tertullian, Codex Theodosianus). The hypothesis will be tested that the enlargement of the concept of religion entailed a modification of definitions of religious deviance. This proved important for later developments» (*Programme and Abstracts*, Messina 2009, p. 9).

The paper by Giovanni Filoramo (University of Turin, Italy) dealt with an old topic but one which is of current relevance and constantly evolving: *Dangerous Liasons. Roman Catholic Church and Jewish Communities in the History of Religious Europe*, published in «HR» 2[2010], pp. 103-114. The problem was summarized as follows: «The history of relations between Jews and Catholic Church has experienced three stages. In the first the policy of the Church has fluctuated between two positions, both already present in Paul: an attitude of openness towards the Jews in view of their final conversion (*Rom* 9-11) that makes their presence in Christian society needed; and a policy of exclusion, linked to the dangers that may come to the Christians because of mixing with Jews imitating their practices and customs (*Gal* 4-5). With notable exceptions, in the *societas Christiana* until the modern age has prevailed the first position. The rupture of confessional unity and the religious conflicts that followed helped the second position, encouraging the process of ghettoization. The third period, dominated by the emergence of racial antisemitism, culminated in the Holocaust. A common thread that binds the three periods is the continuation of a tradition of anti-Judaism of ideological nature. It has fed during the twentieth century a Catholic anti-Semitism. The Shoah has put in place a process of self-criticism, which led the Catholic Church to rediscover the profound bond with the Jews as “elder brothers”» (*Programme and Abstracts*, Messina 2009, p. 7).

The contribution by EASR General Secretary, Kim Knott (University of Leeds, UK), introduced a theme of a methodological nature which has a strong impact on the present historical and cultural situation. It poses urgent questions which await answers from scholars of history of religions: *Theoretical and Methodological Resources for Breaking open the Secular and Exploring the Boundary between Religion and non-Religion*, published in «RH» 2(2010), pp. 115-134. Knott wrote that «The secular condition, secularism and the associated non-religious ideological categories of agnosticism and atheism have particular significance in contemporary Europe (which, according to Grace Davie, is “the exceptional case”). Given that these concepts and their associated fields of belief, practice and organisation represent a counter-field of interest for scholars of religion, as well as an increasingly important arena in the politics of religion, we ignore them at our peril. I will present some resources for their investigation, with reference to several examples of

religious/secular controversy. Furthermore, I will examine what happens around the boundary between the religious and secular and make a case for a reconstitution of the object of our studies to include “non-religion” as well as “religion”» (*Programme and Abstracts*, Messina 2009, p. 8).

Maya Burger (EASR President, University of Lausanne, Switzerland), with her paper on *Europe and India: an Essay in Creative Misunderstanding* (published in «HR» 2[2010], pp. 135-146), introduced us – with a talk of great historical and cultural significance – to the issue of the relations between Europe and the vast and variegated panorama of the other cultures with which it has always and variously interacted. From them, European culture and religion has drawn stimuli and elements and in turn has exercised a decisive influence on them, in various, often dramatically violent forms, on a military, political, economic and social level. Presenting her paper, she explained that «The title alludes to the book by Wilhelm Halbfass (*India and Europe: an essay in understanding*, Suny Press 1988) as well as to a term from translation theory in order to accentuate that his perspective deserves to be supplemented. Since the 18th century it is no longer a history of exchange, but a *common* history of mutual interaction and interrelation. Halbfass asserted that both, India and Europe or Europe and India have to be studied simultaneously to understand the one and the other. However, the impact of India on the history of ideas in Europe has not always been adequately acknowledged. Its influence on the history of religions as an European academic discipline has not been studied with the same intensity and commitment. The encounter with India (apart from the more general, abstract theorizing about the encounter with the so called “other”) has had a lasting impact on the formative period of the history of religions (for example W. Hegel, F. M. Müller, M. Eliade), and, thus, on the shaping of our perception of Indian history. Its epochalization uses mostly European categories. But this is an episode in the *European* history of religions. It promises to be creative to turn back to some decisive moments in this history in order to situate theoretical debates of the discipline in the light of this encounter. Examples of (European) constructions of Indian history can be contrasted with Indian constructs. 'History of religion' can mean what happens in and with a religion in the course of time, it can also mean the historiography, the writing about what happened to a religion in history – and this is an important aspect of our academic discipline. However, to write history is to make history, in Europe as much as in India» (*Programme and Abstracts*, Messina 2009, p. 6).

Last but not least, the contribution of Kari Elisabeth Børresen (Senior Professor, University of Oslo, Norway), illustrating *The Formation and Significance of Christian Gender Models in European*

Culture (cf. HR 2[2010], pp. 147-153), focused on one of the most burning issues of the current historical situation, not only religious – with particular regard to the positions of the various Christian churches in Europe, and in particular of the Catholic Church – but also social, debating the issue of equal rights for men and women. She wrote that «This paper will outline the historical construction of theological anthropology, from Late Antiquity to the 20th century, with focus on women’s gradual achievement of creational *imago Dei*, cf. the new holistic definition of human Godlikeness, accepted in Western theology after the II Vatican Council. Nevertheless, the Catholic and Orthodox Churches continue to proclaim pre-modern sexology, where men and women are created with gender-specific, non interchangeable rights and duties. In consequence, this majority of Christendom still opposes women’s reproductive autonomy and upholds women’s cultic incapability, cf. the Vatican refusal to sign the UN’s Convention of Women (CEDAW 1979), and the CIC, canon 1024 (1983). The ensuing collision with the secular principle of Universal Human Rights (UDHR 1948) is in Europe aggravated by the emergence of Islam. The paper will also analyse the concordant anthropology of these variants of monotheistic religion. A main challenge in the EU, cf. national concordats with the Holy See, is that socio-political gender equality is less developed in the so-called Catholic and Orthodox countries than in the Northern welfare states, which are more influenced by Protestant culture. In a global perspective, it is necessary to clarify the conflict between collective liberty for pre-modern religions, which prescribe gender-specific female rights, and the 21st-century actualisation of women’s universal human rights» (*Programme and Abstracts*, p. 6).

This brief overview of the topics addressed in the Plenary Sessions gives an idea of the extent and variety of issues related to the theme of the Conference, which were discussed and developed by the papers presented in the various sessions and Panels.

The conference Proceedings, organised into Sessions and Panels, basically followed the lines drawn in the initial project. The many individual presentations were situated within the following Sessions, and are now published in the order in which the sessions took place:

1. “Religious Europe” in the Mediterranean context: between Asia and Africa. Contacts and influences: Antiquity and Late Antiquity; the Middle Ages; the Modern Age, the Contemporary Age
2. The History of the “History of Religions”
3. Meeting and conflicts between peoples and cultures: the role of religions in the European Scenario. From Antiquity to the present day
4. Europe: centre for the “diffusion” of religious traditions and pole of “attraction”. From Antiquity to the present day

5. Religion, Art and Archaeology.

The list of the 16 Panels, on which it is not possible to dwell in detail here, shows the variety of interests that fuel the current range of our studies in the various nations of Europe.

1. W. Alberts, T. Jensen, *Textbooks and syllabuses for religion education (RE): the notion of religion and the representation of individual religions.*

2. W. Alberts, T. Jensen, *Non-Confessional RE in European post-communist countries.*

3. G. Casadio, *Raffaele Pettazzoni: an Italian Scholar in the International Context of the IAHR.*

4. S. Claerhout, *The European Experience and the Concept of Religion.*

5. N. Cusumano, *Memory and Religion in the Greek World.*

6. F. Mora, *The Circulated Sacred Text.*

7. M. Pasi, *The presence of esoteric currents and ideas in Italy from the 18th century to our days.*

8. T. Sakaranaho, H. Kupari, *Conceptualizing Religiosity: Perspectives of Social Memory.*

9. E. Sanzi, C. Sfameni, D. Wiebe, *From One Side to the Other of the Mediterranean Sea in Late Antiquity: Religious Traditions in Comparison.*

10. C. Giuffrè Scibona, *Mysteries, Dionysism, Orphism. Analogies, tangencies and differences.*

11. A. Hvithamar, I.Kh. Maksutov, *Orthodox Christianity and Contemporary Europe: traditions and transformations.*

11b. Workshop: I.Kh. Maksutov, *International On line-Conference for the Study of Religions.*

12. A. Mastrocinque, J. Rüpke, *Religious experience in sanctuaries in the Roman World.*

13. M. Mazza, G. Casadio, N. Spineto, *Religio- historical historiography in Italy, between the end of the nineteenth Century and World War II.*

14. Workshop: J. Rüpke, K. von Stuckrad, *How to write a History of Religion of Europe?*

15. M. Massenzio, P. Scarpi, *History of Religions as comparative history: West, the "Other" and the origin of the religious fact.*

16. K. Knott, V. Anttonen, *Theorizing the Sacred: Secular and Religious Approaches.*

Many of these Panels will be the subjects of monographic publications edited by the individual organisers, while others, together with the contributions in the various Sessions, are included in these Proceedings. In particular, I would like to mention that the two Panels 5 (*Memory and Religion in the Greek World*) and 12 (*Religious experience in sanctuaries in the Roman World*) will constitute a single volume published in the Postdamer Altertumswissenschaftliche Beiträge Series, Franz Steiner Verlag, Stuttgart, edited by Prof. J. Rüpke, Prof. A.

Mastrocinque and Prof. N. Cusumano. The works of Panel 10 (*Mysteries, Dionysism, Orphism. Analogies, tangencies and differences*), moderated by C. Giuffrè Scibona, will be published in the Hierà Series, ed. G. Sfameni Gasparro, Edizioni Lionello Giordano, Cosenza. F. Mora will edit the publication of the works of Panel 6 (*The Circulated Sacred Text*) in the Journal “Polifemo” (2011).

In the opening address of the Conference to the academic authorities and participants, I tried to outline, together with the project and its aims, some aspects of how my personal vision of the historical-religious discipline has been formed, starting with its roots in the teaching of Ugo Bianchi, then developing, over time, in the contact and discussion with many scholars interested in the themes which represent the object of my research. It seems appropriate to reproduce here, without significant changes, the text presented on that occasion, since it reflects with immediacy – compared to a possible new presentation of the issues – what was a human experience, and not just an academic one, the result of a long journey of preparation of the Conference and the first, personal contact with the many colleagues who were preparing to take an active role in the proceedings and to provide, in their presentations an debates, new stimuli for the furthering of research in our discipline.

«Dear Rector, Authorities, Colleagues,

I am extremely happy to welcome you to the inauguration of the 9th Annual EASR Conference and IAHR Special Conference, here in the Main Hall of the University of Messina. I am grateful to you for having responded with such generosity and commitment to the invitation – on behalf of the Italian Society of the History of Religions – to reflect on the role of “Religion in the history of European Culture”, a theme of wide-reaching and fundamental importance. The centrality of this theme in the current panorama of our discipline is confirmed by the number and variety of the topics proposed both by the organisers of the various Panels and by the individual scholars presenting papers in the main sessions, which deal with some of the major issues involved in this wide-ranging and ambitious project. Over the next few days we will be involved in an intense analysis of a wide variety of historico-cultural contexts, from antiquity to the present day, and in comparing interpretative methods and formulas which without doubt, thanks to the diversity of our respective positions, will be a source of mutual stimulus and enrichment. I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for your contributions and I am sure that with your collaboration our difficult objective may be confidently pursued. I would now like to briefly mention the various events leading up to this occasion, justifying the choice of Sicily, and in particular the city and University of Messina as the venue for this meeting, under the patronage of the Italian Society for the History of Religions.

Between 1st-5th May 2000, a small group of us met in Kraków – on the occasion of the Regional Conference of the Polish Association for the Science of Religions (also a special IAHR Conference), organised by our Colleague H. Grzymala-Moszczyńska – to define the general outlines of a project to establish and promote a European Association for the Study of Religions. The project's first goal has been achieved, by getting the various national European Associations for the study of religions to agree to the constitution of a forum for the discussion of the fundamental problems and themes of our discipline, both from a methodological and substantial perspective, and from a European "point of view".

I would like to remind you that a successful start in this direction was made in Messina, on the occasion of the first meeting of the Executive Committee elected in Kraków, with the International Seminar on *Themes and Problems of the History of Religions in Contemporary Europe* (30-31 March 2001). The papers from P. Antes, M. Pye, H. Kippenberg, W. Hofstee, Ph. Borgeaud, G. Benavides, P. Pachis, H. Grzymala-Moszczyńska, Ch. Guittard, M. Abumalham, G. Casadio and myself, and the resulting discussions between the participants at the meeting led us to start reflecting on important historico-religious themes in the framework of the tradition of European studies, following a proposal already made in Kraków.

Over recent years, all the National European Associations have approved the proposal, as all the successive EASR Conferences testify, from Cambridge (2001), Paris (2002), Bergen (2003), Santander (2004), Turku (2005), Bucharest (2006), Bremen (2007) and Brno (2008) to the present Meeting.

I would also like to thank all those Colleagues who chose to entrust me with the difficult yet at the same time prestigious role as President of the new Association in the year of its creation – the most important and delicate period in its life –, and who then confirmed my post in the two subsequent triennial cycles of its activity. I accepted this role not only and not so much as a personal acknowledgement (since many other Colleagues would be better suited than I to hold the position), but rather as an act of homage to the Italian tradition of historico-religious studies, and in particular to the school represented by the teaching of Ugo Bianchi, in turn influenced by the teaching of the great Master Raffaele Pettazzoni, the co-founder and president of the IAHR, and the 50th anniversary of whose death we celebrate on this occasion, with a review of his scholarship.

I need not here stress the authoritativeness and academic importance of the contributions made to the progress of historico-religious research by these great scholars. I would only like to recall the dedication and tenacity with which my Master, Ugo Bianchi, wished to maintain and strengthen the links between the Italian Society of the History of Religions, as a national organisation with a specific tradition of studies, founded by Raffaele Pettazzoni, and the vast and varied international panorama expressed in and represented by the IAHR. He always maintained that a fundamental duty of the scholar of religious phenomena was dialectic exchange with other scholars, including those with different methodological perspectives, defending tenaciously one's own position, but always interested in and respectful of those of others, with the aim of achieving real progress in the historical knowledge of these phenomena. His

great dedication led him to be intensely involved in the scientific activities of the IAHR, culminating in the organisation of the 16th IAHR Congress in Rome in 1990 on the central theme of our discipline (*The notion of "Religion" in Comparative Research*) and in his election as the Association's President, for the period 1990-1995. U. Bianchi taught for ten years in Messina and here, in April 1966 – under the aegis of the IAHR – he organised the great and seminal International Colloquium on the origins of Gnosticism, which brought together in the University of Messina the leading authorities on the subject⁶. Anyone who is familiar with this field of study will not consider as merely rhetorical the definition "epoch-making" when applied to that event, and will acknowledge Ugo Bianchi the merit of having foreseen, with brilliant intuition supported by his meditated knowledge of the related historical questions, the importance and the scientific fruitfulness of the problem. This, then, is the tradition within which this Conference is placed, in the hope that it can live up to its inspiring model. In any case, this initiative has been made possible by the financial and institutional support of the University of Messina, in the person of the Chancellor, Prof. Francesco Tomasello, who I would like to warmly thank for his generous support, as well as other city and regional institutions, such as the Accademia Peloritana dei Pericolanti, the Bonino-Puleio Foundation, the "Officina di Studi Medievali" and the "Fondazione Buttitta" in Palermo, the Banco di Sicilia-Unicredit, the Provincial Council, the City Council, the Regional President's Office and the Regional Council Department of the Arts, whose representatives I would like to thank. Equally important have been the support and solidarity of the Dean of the Faculty of Letters and Philosophy, Prof. Fera, and all the Colleagues of the Faculty, many of whom have contributed with papers to the Conference. Last but not least, I have great pleasure in mentioning all the members of the Organising Committee for their dedication to preparing the Conference and in particular the small but dedicated team of my pupils, including Augusto Cosentino and Mariangela Monaca, without whose generous commitment and enthusiasm this event would not have been possible.

Lastly, I would like to say a few words to explain my choice of the image – that of the "Virgin Annunciate" by Antonello, on display in the Galleria Regionale in Palermo, at present in the Museo Regionale of Messina – as our "emblem", in its own way representative of this meeting. The choice of a work by one of leading figures in 15th century European art, Antonello da Messina, whose very name marks his origins, is not the result of banal parochial pride, nor is it motivated by the painting's absolute and incomparable artistic perfection, to which our modest reproductions do little justice. The copies are merely an invitation to consider the unique and incommunicable experience – *mysteriodes* – of the original.

The image of the "Annunciate" in fact struck me as an eloquent metaphor both of those historical phenomena which – despite the heated debates on their definition – we persist in calling "religious", and also of that which I consider the best way of approaching them. As for each of those phenomena, historico-

⁶ *Le origini dello gnosticismo. Colloquio di Messina, 13-18 aprile 1966* («Studies in the History of Religions, Supplements to Numen», XII), U. Bianchi (ed.), E.J. Brill, Leiden 1967.

cultural, ideological and even “theological” conditioning are clear in this female image, with its well-defined Sicilian anthropological identity, its severe and yet gentle reserve. The evangelical theme, the Lucan themes of the “Annunciation to Mary” – the foundation and heart of the Christian event – has been assimilated in a consolidated theological tradition, in which the artist participates and of which he is an inspired interpreter, positioning the human face within a triangular framework whose precise theological meaning requires no comment. The expression, absorbed but directed outwards, and the gesture of the Virgin’s hand – together with the greeting and suspended attention – also reach out “beyond” the scene perceived by the observer, to something only the woman experiences.

In this, it seems to me, we may recognise one of the aspects – perhaps the primary and decisive aspect – of the numerous and varied events that we continue to define as “religious”, which are presented, in various ways, as intending to establish a relationship between man and the community to which he belongs and “another” level of powers, presences and realities which cannot be reached with the usual means of human cognitive activity. This image, as a paradigm, thus warns us that the subject of our investigations is always historically conditioned, while having a common anthropological foundation, in terms of its biological and psychological dimension. Precise cultural conditioning at the same time defines the very position of the researcher and her “point of view” in the approach to religious phenomena, both of her own tradition and of those belonging to different cultures. This inevitable conditioning, however, if assessed correctly and adopted by the scholar, may become, rather than a limit to study and comprehension, an additional tool for acquiring knowledge of phenomena which are historically and culturally varied yet, on the basis of comparison, seen as being similar to those of one’s own cultural tradition, and thus also definable, without undue ethnocentrism, as “religious”.

At the same time, the “beyond” evoked in the canvas of Antonello has no figure or identity. If the specific historical situation of the “Annunciate”, in its Christian and European dimension as it was culturally defined in Sicily in the 15th century, endows this “beyond” with a precise meaning, its absence from the view of the observer can be seen as a paradigm of the peculiar quality of religion. This is in fact a projection into a dimension which is “unknown”, yet which can be variously articulated and circumscribed from time to time under the changing influences of human cultural experience. The scholar, while driven to investigate these multiple historical experiences with all the means of positive investigation, is warned that the “normative” definition or the “judgment of truth” on this dimension – outside the picture – remains outside the grasp of the legitimate tools of historical research which, with patience and modesty, we must rely on to elaborate the necessary interpretative theories, in turn verifiable using those same instruments».

