

## Establishing a Beachhead: NAASR, Twenty Years Later

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Next year, 2005, NAASR will be celebrating the twentieth anniversary of its founding. Given the current discussions about the future of NAASR, we thought it might be of some interest to revisit the reasons we founded NAASR in the first place and to rehearse and assess what we take to be some of its more significant achievements.

Acting as an *ad hoc* organizing committee, E. Thomas Lawson, Luther H. Martin, and Donald Wiebe founded the North American Association for the Study in 1985, in the words of its mission statement:

to encourage the historical, comparative and structural study of religion in the North American community of scholars, to promote publication of such scholarly research, and to represent North American scholars in the study of religion to, and connect them with, the international community of scholars engaged in the study of religion.<sup>1</sup>

As we stated in the initial letter of invitation to prospective members (2 October 1985), it had increasingly

become apparent to a number of scholars, especially those engaged in the history or religions, comparative religions, or the scientific study of religions, or simply those who [felt] the need for theoretical work in the field, that the American Academy of Religion [had] become such a complex and competing repository of interests that the academic study of religion was in danger of being lost in the process.

The American Academy of Religion came into existence in 1964 as successor to the National Association of Biblical Instructors (NABI), which had been founded in 1909 and dedicated to assisting in the practical development of the religious life of students and increasing the spirit of fellowship, as they put it, among religion instructors in American colleges and universities. By the mid-1950s and early 1960s these religious objectives came under review because of the increasing diversity of religious views among the Association's member and because of changes in the academic study of religion. Although Claude Welch announced in his presidential address (1970) that the new AAR had self-consciously committed itself to a scholarly-scientific agenda, the Academy had not, in his view, moved very much beyond the hegemonic liberal

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<sup>1</sup> NAASR Statement of Purpose, 1985. E. Thomas Lawson, one of the three founders of NAASR with the present authors is currently in residence in Belfast as Co-director of the new Institute for Cognition and Culture, Queen's University of Belfast.

Protestant framework that had dominated the NABI. As Welch had feared, and William Clebsch confirmed in his presidential address a decade later, the Academy fell back into the arms of religiously oriented interests where it has largely remained to this day. There were some in the AAR who by this time had become frustrated with the Academy's inability to transform itself into an institution that was able to encourage the development of a genuine scientific/scholarly approach to the study of religion, free from religious influence. The original membership of NAASR, consequently, sought to establish an alternative venue in which to work toward the establishment of a sound, academic study of religion, not in opposition to the AAR but complementary to it.

At its first organizational meeting in Anaheim (1985), program proposals were also discussed. Rather than continuing the conventional academic tradition of presenting successive days of individual papers on unrelated topics, initial program proposals included invited speakers, panel presentations on specific topics or themes, e.g., extended critiques of recently published studies of theory and/or method, and structured occasions for both formal and informal discussion.

In addition, we founded NAASR to extend the collegial and institutional relationships of North American scholars. NAASR was actually founded in the context of the XIVth Congress of the International Association for the History of Religions (IAHR) in Sydney, Australia (August, 1985). At the time, the only U.S. association affiliated with the IAHR was the American Association for the Study of Religion (AASR), an association whose membership is limited and is by invitation only. We felt strongly that United States scholars should be represented in international organizations by democratic associations. At the conclusion of the Sydney congress, we submitted an application to the Executive Committee of the IAHR for affiliation of NAASR. According to the by-laws of the IAHR, this application could only be acted upon by the meeting of its General Assembly at its next quinquennial Congress in 1990, when it was, indeed, accepted.

It was also our proposal to offer the AAR a means whereby its interested members might also become officially associated with the IAHR through NAASR. We envisioned NAASR becoming an AAR “related scholarly organization” and that AAR members interested in affiliation with the IAHR could do so through membership in NAASR. In this way, AAR could avoid paying dues to the IAHR on behalf of its total membership, many—perhaps most—of whom had no special interest in a relationship with the IAHR, while at the same time allowing for a cooperative and mutually supportive relationship between the AAR and the international community of scholars of religion. The AAR was uninterested in this relationship.

A brief institutional history of NAASR includes:

**August 1985** - founded, Sydney, Australia and application for affiliation with the IAHR submitted and officially received.

**November 1985** - U.S. organizational meeting, Anaheim, CA.; application submitted to AAR for affiliation as a “related scholarly organization”

**November 1986** - constitution and by-laws adopted (amended 1987).

**February 1987** - incorporation in the State of Vermont as a non-profit, tax-exempt corporation (thus establishing the academic association under the legal protection of NAASR, Inc.)

**November 1987** - application to the AAR for affiliation as a “related scholarly organization” rejected by the Executive Committee of the AAR.<sup>2</sup>

**January 1988** - affiliation with the Council of Societies for the Study of Religion (CSSR).

**August 1990** - official approval of affiliation with the IAHR by its General Assembly, Rome. (Affiliation of AASR with IAHR dropped in 1995).

**August 1991** – first NAASR sponsored international conference/IAHR regional Conference.

**January 1993** - *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* adopted as the official journal of NAASR (initially published by Mouton de Gruyter, subsequently by E. J. Brill).

**October 1994** - informal relationship established with the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion (SSSR) as a venue for regional meetings of NAASR.

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<sup>2</sup> James B. Wiggins, Executive Director of the AAR wrote the following letter to NAASR to inform it of the Board of Director's decision:

Although I know that you were informally told by others, I write officially to communicate that the Board of Directors of the American Academy of Religion did not approve the petition from the North American Association for the Study of Religion to become a Related Scholarly Organization. The reasons were, as I heard them, essentially these: 1) Nothing about such a relationship is required for the NAASR to achieve its affiliation with the IAHR. 2) Nothing in such a relationship is required for any AAR members so inclined independently to have a relationship with the NAASR. 3) Since the NAASR was not seeking an Affiliated Society relationship with the AAR, the AAR would gain nothing from it. 4) All three of the AAR initials appear in the NAASR letters.

The Board was overwhelmingly opposed, in terms of numbers.

It seemed to us that, on the face of it, these reasons are spurious and that the Board of Directors simply did not wish an association with our stated goals to be a part of its “umbrella” organization—a conclusion confirmed to us confidentially by “friendly members” of the Board present when the decision was taken and present subsequent years at continuing discussions by the Board concerning “what to do about NAASR”.

**March 1998** – second application for affiliation as a “related scholarly organization” resubmitted to AAR; accepted May 1998.

Our relationship with other professional societies has been strong. Given that one of the reasons for the founding of NAASR was to affiliate with the IAHR, it is not surprising that our relationship with this association has been most productive. In addition to organizing and sponsoring two IAHR regional conferences,<sup>3</sup> NAASR has offered logistical and financial support to the IAHR. As well as regular payment of our annual dues, NAASR has contributed \$1000.00 to the IAHR endowment fund. NAASR members have been active in the IAHR as elected officers on the Executive Committee, as members of the International Committee, and as organizers of panels and as presenters at every IAHR quinquennial congress and at many regional conferences since 1990. NAASR has also supported the collegial and scholarly aims of the Council of Societies for the Study of Religion (CSSR). Members of NAASR have served on the General Counsel of the CSSR, have served as editors for the *Bulletin of the CSSR*. In addition to the *Bulletin*, all NAASR members receive the *Religious Studies Review*, to which members of NAASR contribute and which is also published by the CSSR.

NAASR has an informal relationship with SSSR in which NAASR members may attend, present, and organize panels without being SSSR members. A number of panels so organized have been published.<sup>4</sup>

NAASR's annual meetings have been held, since our first meeting, coincident with the annual meetings of the AAR. In 2001, NAASR was recognized as an AAR “related scholarly organization”.

MTSR, founded as a scholarly journal by graduate students at the University of Toronto, has flourished since being adopted as the official journal of NAASR. Under the leadership of its first NAASR editor, Russell McCutcheon, MTSR became a widely read

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<sup>3</sup> August 1991: NAASR sponsored international conference/IAHR regional Conference (with additional support from the University of California, Santa Cruz and the University of Toronto), the University of Vermont, “Religious Transformations and Socio-Political Change” (proceedings published, 1993, Mouton de Gruyter); August 1998 : NAASR sponsored international conference/IAHR regional conference, in cooperation with the Czech Society for the Study of Religion, Masaryk University, Brno (with additional support from the East-East Foundation of the Czech Republic and the Spencer Foundation), “The Academic Study of Religion during the Cold War” (proceedings published, 2000, Peter Lang Press).

<sup>4</sup> E.g., two panels at the November 1997 meeting of SSSR: a panel on “The Definition of Religion in the Context of Social Scientific Study”, published as a special issue of *Historical Reflections/Réflexions Historiques* 25.3 (1999), and a symposium on “Rodney Stark’s *The Rise of Christianity: A Review Symposium*”, published as “Review Symposium on Rodney Stark’s *The Rise of Christianity*”, *Religious Studies Review* 25/2 (1999).

and highly respected international journal devoted to theory and method in the academic study of religion.

Organizing interesting and relevant annual programs has, in many ways, been the most challenging problem NAASR has had to address. As stated above, we had hoped, from the beginning, to establish an innovative format alternative to the traditional academic modality of individual presentations on unrelated topics as an introduction to four more days of the same in the context of the AAR. This intent has proved to be difficult to sustain. While numerous fascinating and significant papers have been presented at NAASR over the years (a number of which have subsequently been published), some of our most successful programs in the past have included, in our opinion, panels organized to critically address specific methodological and/or theoretical initiatives in the field. For example, the cognitive science of religion and rational choice theory have emerged over the past years as two important theoretical approaches to the study of religion and NAASR has played an important supportive role to scholars involved in these projects.

Program proposals that have not been acted upon include a standing offer for members to organize conferences with NAASR sponsorship and a standing offer to members to organize on-going seminars, research projects, discussion groups, etc. in the context of the annual meeting program

In addition to formal programs, panels, etc., one of the more appreciated contribution NAASR has made to our members—or so we have often been told—has been the sometime receptions organized in connection with annual meetings and international conferences. These receptions have offered NAASR members and their guests a collegial occasion—otherwise lacking in the context of large meetings—to meet old friends, make new friends, and even to initiate plans for collaborative work in the field.

In our judgement, the challenges still facing NAASR still include the creation of genuinely alternative and creative annual program formats. In addition, NAASR needs to develop a more inclusive and efficient organizational structure; work towards increasing active membership; and continue to facilitate our international connections. We conclude that the membership of NAASR can be justifiably proud of its accomplishments over the past twenty years. For a small scholarly organization, it has made significant contributions to a theoretically based study of religion both nationally and internationally.