

International Perspectives on/in the Field

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As the Igbo of Nigeria say, you do not stand in one place to watch a masquerade. Likewise, there are manifold ways to approach a discussion on international perspectives both *in* and *on* the field of religious studies. It goes without saying that any treatment of the topic is partial and context-driven. That said, I am probably both motivated and well positioned in a number of ways to offer some reflections on this timely question. I studied in British universities, conducted graduate research and taught in Nigeria, have been employed in US universities since 1986, have served on the International Connections Committee (2001-2004) at the American Academy of Religion (AAR), and have been active in the leadership of the International Association for the History of Religions (IAHR) from 1995-2015. I currently serve as an IAHR Honorary Life Member and as Vice President of the International Council of Philosophy and the Human Sciences [CIPSH] (formerly related to UNESCO). There is not a year when I am not attending or helping organize conferences and meetings in various parts of the world, whether Africa, Asia, or Europe. Together with my ongoing research and networking with colleagues in Africa, particularly Nigeria, Uganda, Zimbabwe, and South Africa, I get a lot of exposure to developments and challenges in the field, particular in terms of its professional dynamics. It is why I can offer some “thick description” on what is happening on the international scene, with the invaluable help of numerous colleagues who have kindly shared information and reflections on internationalizing trends in the study of religion in their respective constituencies.¹

The orientation of the present paper is influenced by three considerations. *First*, while I could have centered my remarks on the IAHR as the “preeminent international forum for the critical, analytical and cross-cultural study of religion, past and present,” I have chosen to focus on certain aspects of its work, such as its regional and affiliate associations, that tie into the particular angles I wish to explore in this venue.² I am cognizant of the fact that there may be limited awareness of the work of the IAHR at this conference, beyond NAASR, and maybe even within NAASR itself (which was founded in 1985 and adopted as an IAHR member association in

¹ My thanks go to Joseph Allen, Greg Alles, Amy Allocco, Bolaji Bateye, Jenny Berglund, Elias Bongmba, Megan Bryson, Edward Curtis IV, Satoko Fujiwara, Armin Geertz, Adrian Herman, Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, Morny Joy, Chongsuh Kim, Amarjiva Lochan, Phillip Lucas, Marco Pasi, Robert Puckett, Lee-Shae Scharnick-Udemans, Johan Strijdom, Bron Taylor, Abdulkader Tayob, Cathy Wessinger.

² <http://www.iahrweb.org/about.php> (accessed November 2, 2019).

1990).³ However, information on the various IAHR national and regional member (now up to 40) and affiliate associations (6) is readily available through its website, reports, publications, and social media.⁴ Moreover, a recent 60th anniversary issue, “NVMEN, the Academic Study of Religion, and the IAHR: Past, Present and Prospects,” of the IAHR’s flagship journal, *NVMEN* (2016) constitutes a valuable resource, containing over four hundred pages of historical documents and addresses, retrospectives, and current and future reflections on the achievements of both the journal and the association.⁵ From its formative period in the 1950s to the present day, one reads how the IAHR has struggled with its Eurocentric origins, despite significant international outreach and affirmative action from the 1990s onwards to develop a more “global character” (see Pye 2016; Jensen 2016: 202-13). For example, in my contribution to the publication, I reflect on IAHR growth from 1995-2015, and the challenges and benefits of conference planning in various parts of the world, particularly the Global South (Hackett 2016).⁶ However, those with foundationalist leanings (namely, the argument that the study of religion should be strictly “scientific” and “academic”) (see Wiebe 2016) take issue with tendencies to theological and applied religious studies that they perceive as endemic in non-Western locations. In fact, following complaints about the Tokyo Congress program in 2015, the IAHR Executive Committee moved to tighten up its academic profile with a new policy statement and addition to the Constitution, stating that the IAHR is “not a forum for confessional, apologetic or other similar concerns” (Jensen 2016: 204).

Second, another entry point into the international status of the field would be via country or regional reports, from either a scholarly association (such as an IAHR member association) or scholars with local expertise.⁷ To some extent the IAHR collects such data in its reports, however this does not offer the more holistic and historical view that Greg Alles aimed for in his ambitious publication, *Religious Studies: A Global View* (2008). This important book explores the trends of the past sixty years from a global perspective, with chapters from scholars in ten different regions of the world. Alles concludes that while it would be premature to claim a global vision of the comparative study of religion, there is ample evidence that religious studies is not the sole preserve of the Western academy. The present paper will echo and amplify those findings.

While I concur with Alles on that note, and this brings me to my *third* consideration, my preference for a multi-perspectival approach that reveals the centrifugal and centripetal forces

³ <https://naasr.com>

⁴ <http://www.iahrweb.org/members.php> (accessed November 2, 2019).

⁵ <https://brill.com/view/title/32420> (accessed November 2, 2019).

⁶ See, especially, the chapters by Michael Pye (2016, chapters 12 and 15) who has been one of the most effective advocates for the importance of non-Western perspectives, leadership, and conference locations in the IAHR.

⁷ I attempted to do this in the 1980s for Nigeria and the 1990s for Africa (Hackett 1988, 1993).

at work in our academic enterprise in this globalizing, technology-driven world. By examining a range of IAHR regional and affiliated associations, along with communities of scholars, learned societies, book series, journals, working groups, and collaborative research initiatives, we can better appreciate the complex range of responses and strategies in relation to internationalization processes in our field, whether internally or externally generated (or both). By using what I term a “nodal” and “interstitial” approach, one can better discern how the “international” trope is variously defined and deployed, whether as best practice, value addition, recalibration, legitimacy, elitism, or redemption. The aspirations and anxieties that are attendant upon greater inclusion, outreach, and diversity in our academic work are inseparable from the broader forces of globalization, neoliberalism, and marketization (see Alles 2019). Internationalist discourses invoke, just as much as they may deny, the imperatives of decolonization and postcoloniality (Nye 2019).

CASE STUDIES

Scholarly Associations: National and Regional

It makes sense to begin with the **American Academy of Religion** given this panel’s location. On the AAR webpage serving international participants, we read that “the AAR has long been interested in how it can best serve the needs of its international members and facilitate critical conversations about the diverse ways that religion is studied in different geographical settings and institutional contexts.”⁸ The AAR does not have any formal policy on internationalization, although the charge of the International Connections Committee (ICC) is a good indication of its priorities:

*The International Connections Committee fosters attention to the worldwide scope of scholarship in religion and the international composition of the Academy’s membership. To fulfill its charge, the committee sponsors special programs, communicates with scholars abroad, and extends hospitality to international attendees at the annual meeting. The ICC’s signature program is the Collaborative International Grant competition, for which ICC members evaluate proposals and serve as the grants jury.*⁹

The AAR joined the IAHR in 2010 after years of deliberations (in which I participated). It claims that IAHR membership “has enabled us to foster cross-national scholarship and collaboration and to establish new relationships with others among the IAHR member organizations.” According to Amy Allocco, who helped steer the Collaborative International Research Grants (CIRG) program into existence, this hallmark program, which is jointly administered with the IAHR Executive, has generated some important scholarship and provided access to international

⁸ <https://www.aarweb.org/about/international-members> (accessed November 5, 2019).

⁹ The current chair of the ICC is Olga Kazmina of Moscow State University.

research opportunities.¹⁰ For example, Adrian Herman, an active AAR, EASR, and SSEASR (the South and South East Asian Association for the Study of Culture and Religion) member from the University of Bonn, submitted a project proposal in 2018, “The Philippines as a Site of Religion: Regional Connections and Global Entanglements,” that was successfully funded. The seeds for the project were sown at the SSEASR (an IAHR regional association) biennial conference in Manila in 2013. The grant allowed the three project leaders (based in Germany, the US, and the Philippines respectively) to organize a small conference and develop a book-length publication. I recently submitted a proposal to develop an edited book on Rastafari in Africa with two Zimbabwean colleagues. If funded, we plan to organize a panel and editorial meeting at the African Association for the Study of Religions (AASR) conference in Dakar, Senegal, next July. Many other examples of this type of productive international networking with seed money could be adduced.

In contrast to the above-mentioned multi-sited projects, we should also note the ongoing efforts by the AAR to attract international members and participants.¹¹ The data on international attendees for the 2019 AAR are as follows: 619 international out of 4176 registered (as of 11/4/19). 30 Travel Grants were awarded, 11 of those to international members.¹² The country breakdown reflects the domination of the Global North, with a few individuals coming from Global South countries such as Nigeria.

Canada	176
United Kingdom	120
Germany	46
Australia	35
Norway	33
Sweden	23
Netherlands	20
Japan	17
Denmark	13
South Africa	12
Switzerland	10

We may note that the numbers and breakdown are fairly similar for the last five years.

¹⁰ <https://www.aarweb.org/node/1718> (accessed November 5, 2019).

¹¹ It should be noted that international scholars can join the AAR for an annual fee of \$15.

¹² Information from Robert Puckett, AAR Chief Scholarly Engagement Officer, November 4, 2019.

INTERNATIONAL MEMBERS AT THE ANNUAL MEETING

2018 Denver	2017 Boston	2016 San Antonio	2015 Atlanta	2014 San Diego	2013 Baltimore
591	669	559	598	738	623

Given the costs of attending the AAR, or the quinquennial IAHR World Congress for that matter,¹³ it is not surprising that the IAHR regional and special conferences have grown in popularity over the years. We can now turn to the three most active IAHR **regional associations** (I hope I may be forgiven for not including NAASR in my discussions on this occasion), namely the **European Association for the Study of Religions (EASR)**, the **African Association for the Study of Religions (AASR)**, and the **South and South East Asian Association for the Study of Culture and Religion (SSEASR)**.¹⁴ I will not dwell on statistics but rather on how these various associations have developed multiple strategies to serve their members and promote their scholarly work more widely.

The **European Association** was founded at the IAHR Special Conference in Cracow, Poland in 2000.¹⁵ It became affiliated with the IAHR at the XVIIIth congress in the same year.¹⁶ It describes its goals as follows:

The European Association for the Study of Religions promotes the academic study of religions through the international collaboration of scholars in Europe whose research has a bearing on the subject. The objective of the EASR is pursued by the usual means of scholarly activity such as the arrangement of conferences, symposia or colloquia, the encouragement of scholarly publications, the exchange of information through electronic or other means, and other activities.

As the number of member associations has grown to 24, notably from Central and Eastern Europe, so, too, has the size of the conferences. As an indication of the vibrant scholarly hub that the EASR has become, the recent 17th Annual EASR conference that took place in Tartu, Estonia, attracted nearly 700 participants.¹⁷ Given that the European region is comprised of

¹³ That notwithstanding, the quinquennial world congress is *the* primary international gathering for religion scholars and for advancing the work of the IAHR. The 22nd world congress will be held from August 23-29, 2020 in Dunedin, New Zealand with a theme of "Centres and Peripheries." <https://www.iahr2020.kiwi/>.

¹⁴ There is also the Latin American regional association: ALER (Asociación Latino Americana para el Estudio de las Religiones /Latin American Association for the Study of Religions).

¹⁵ <http://www.easr.eu>

¹⁶ On the relationship between the EASR and the IAHR, see Jensen 2016.

¹⁷ <https://easr2019.org/>

many countries and languages, an interesting feature of the EASR is the emphasis it places on the networks it supports: 1) a network of electronic discussion groups for various language regions and 2) a network of general links for its member associations. As noted on the EASR website, the main reason for having more than one electronic discussion list is to avoid domination by any one language. The discussion groups are as follows:

- [Candide](#) (French)
- [Dolmen](#) (English)
- [Most](#) (East European languages)
- [Synkron](#) (Nordic languages plus English)
- [Tonantzin](#) (Spanish, Portuguese, Italian)
- [Yggdrasill](#) (German)

The **African Association for the Study of Religions (AASR)** website boasts a detailed history of the association.¹⁸ It attributes its genesis to broader internationalizing initiatives in the IAHR “to explore the institutional and ideological constraints on the study of religion to be met with in various parts of the world” (Pye 1989: 7).¹⁹ It underscores its intimate connection with the IAHR, having been founded at an IAHR Regional Conference at the University of Zimbabwe at Harare, Zimbabwe, in September 1992. It was formally admitted as an IAHR affiliate in the XVIIth IAHR World Congress in Mexico City in 1995. In addition, it reveals how multilateral the drive was to create an African association, and still to sustain it. As the saying goes, it takes a village. Spearheaded by Professor Jan Platvoet in the Netherlands, the initiative involved Africa-based scholars, Africans based in Europe or North America, as well as Western scholars working in Europe, North America, or Africa.²⁰ To build a membership structure in such a vast continent (at least in its sub-Saharan region), the AASR developed a system of regional representatives, including for Europe and the US. The biennial conferences rotate around Africa and are usually lively, productive, and well-attended, including by enthusiastic religious studies students. The ongoing challenge is the engagement of francophone African scholars. The association’s diasporic connections are strong, thanks to the sessions organized at the AAR as a related scholarly organization on an annual basis and to the migrations and peregrinations of individual African/Africanist scholars, such as Elias Bongmba, Jacob Olupona, and Afe Adogame. The AASR publishes an open-access e-journal, the *Journal of the Religions of Africa and its Diaspora*, with an internationally diverse editorial board.²¹ The profile of the association is also

¹⁸ <http://www.a-asr.org/about/>

¹⁹ <http://www.a-asr.org/history-of-aasr/>

²⁰ The Zimbabwe conference was hosted by Dr. James Cox, then teaching at the University of Zimbabwe.

²¹ <http://www.a-asr.org/journal/>

enhanced by its links to two journals, the *Journal of Religion in Africa*²² and the *Journal of Africana Religions*²³ (see below for more on the latter). The well-maintained website constitutes a useful resource for researchers on African religions. We should note also that the first IAHR World Congress held in Africa took place in Durban, South Africa in 2000.²⁴ With funds left over from the congress, an African Trust Fund was created. This proved valuable in supporting the research of the younger generation of Africa-based scholars of religion for a few years.²⁵

Apart from the Nigerian Association for the Study of Religions (NASR) that was founded in 1976 and admitted as an IAHR member association in 1980,²⁶ and still organizes rotating annual conferences and publishes a local journal, national African associations would appear to be relatively unviable. The sub-regional **Association for the Study of Religions in Southern Africa (ASRSA)** is more of a success story. Founded in 1979 and admitted to the IAHR in 1980, it was initially isolated academically due to apartheid. In its post-apartheid phase, it organizes conferences that focus mainly on local and regional issues. Its journal, the *Journal for the Study of Religion*, launched in 1980, is an accredited and peer-reviewed journal whose main interest is the phenomenological and comparative study of the diversity of religions, religious traditions, and the religious movements and formations of Southern Africa.²⁷ Of particular note is the special issue of the journal (2018), ably edited by Johan Strijdom and Lee-Schae Scharnick-Udemans, honoring the work of its former editor, internationally renowned scholar of religion David Chidester.²⁸ Eight of the thirteen articles were written by South African or South Africa-based scholars. One notes the themes of materiality, mediality, sensoriality, decoloniality, indigeneity, race, and frontier zones coursing through the contributions, as in the case of Abdulkader Tayob's piece, "Decolonizing the Study of Religions: Muslim Intellectuals and the Enlightenment Project of Religious Studies."²⁹

Another regional association that has faced many local challenges but has borne fruits is the **South and Southeast Asian Association for the Study of Culture and Religion (SSEASR)**. The SSEASR was established in 2005 during its inaugural conference in New Delhi, India, which was

²² <https://brill.com/view/journals/jra/jra-overview.xml>

²³ http://www.psupress.org/Journals/jnls_JAR.html

²⁴ See Hackett, Rosalind I. J. and Michael Pye, eds. *History of Religions: Origins and Visions. Proceedings of the 18th IAHR World Congress, Durban August 5-12, 2000*. Cambridge, UK: Roots and Branches.

²⁵ <http://www.a-asr.org/iahr-african-trust-fund-research-publication-grant-applications-for-2014/>

²⁶ Membership lapsed due to non-payment of fees.

²⁷ http://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_serial&pid=1011-7601&lng=en&nrm=iso

²⁸ http://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_issuetoc&pid=1011-760120180002&lng=en&nrm=iso

²⁹ <http://www.scielo.org.za/pdf/jsr/v31n2/02.pdf>

an IAHR Regional Conference.³⁰ Some of the hurdles and harassment faced (and eventually transcended) by the SSEASR President, Amarjiva Lochan, in organizing the conference are even noted in the annals of the IAHR.³¹ The association's webpage notes that the Delhi meeting was the first opportunity for scholars from the whole region to join together in a common academic endeavor.³² The SSEASR became affiliated to the IAHR in Tokyo, 2005. Members and institutions hail from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Cambodia, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Laos, Macao, Malaysia, Maldives, Mongolia, Myanmar (Burma), Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Singapore, Thailand, Timore Leste, and Vietnam. Its biennial conferences are lively affairs and logistical challenges, whether it is negotiating with governments (such as India [see above], Bhutan, Bangladesh, and Vietnam) to allow academic conferences on religion to take place on their turf or simply coordinating the participation of such a diverse range of conference attendees and national representatives. The imprimatur of international logos, whether of the IAHR, or the International Council on Philosophy and the Human Sciences (CIPSH), that the IAHR belongs to and which has ties to UNESCO, clearly help the SSEASR cause. Additionally, protocol issues loom large at these conferences as government officials are often present at opening and closing ceremonies.

The SSEASR Constitution notes that it is open to researchers in various disciplines, e.g. history, linguistics, political science, anthropology, sociology, literature, cultural studies, law, folklore, etc. This is not surprising as religion is generally studied in this region under the auspices of other disciplines. For example, the recent SSEASR conference in Bangladesh (June 2019) was populated by several archaeologists who study ancient cities, temples, and mosques in Bangladesh.³³ In some instances, the framing and publicizing of the conferences may play up cultural heritage at the expense of the religion trope, as was the case with the 2017 SSEASR conference in Vietnam. In fact, there was a decision to add "culture" to the title of the 2nd SSEASR conference in Bangkok conference in 2007 as none of the Thai universities in those days had any departments of religious studies. Religion was studied under the auspices of Buddhist Studies, Buddhist Culture, and the Centre for Asian Culture Studies. The addition of the term "culture" proved helpful and it was eventually added to the association title (without changing the acronym).³⁴ That notwithstanding, there appears to be a genuine commitment to developing the critical, historical, and comparative study of religion in the region, as evidenced

³⁰ <http://sseasr.org> The SSEASR publishes a peer reviewed Journal, bi-annual Newsletter and books related to South and Southeast Asian culture and religion.

³¹ <http://www.iahrweb.org/bulletins/Bull38-mar05.pdf>, p. 36

³² See this excellent report on the inaugural conference in New Delhi in 2005 <https://elinepa.org/en/the-2005-sseasr-regional-conference-new-delhi/> (accessed November 17, 2019).

³³ http://sseasr.org/images/pdf/8th_SSEASR_Conference_FINAL_ANNOUNCEMENT.pdf

³⁴ Both the Greek (Greek Society for the Study of Culture and Religion) and the Philippine (Philippine Association for the Study of Culture, History, and Religion) associations also rely on the inclusion of "culture" to provide legitimacy.

by the launch of the Bangladesh Association for the Study of Culture and Religion in June 2019. Several international scholars attend the SSEASR conferences for their research and networking affordances, let alone the popular pre- and post-conference field trips to key religious heritage sites such as Borobudur or Angkor Wat, in the company of local experts and learned colleagues.³⁵

Affiliate Associations and Societies

In addition to the work done by national and regional associations, we should also note the rise of international scholarly associations that focus on particular manifestations or methodologies of religion, usually from a multi- or interdisciplinary perspective. Some of these IAHR- and/or EASR affiliated associations are longstanding, while others are newer creations, reflecting emergent research areas. These research communities serve as crucibles for promoting and developing their respective (sub-) fields whether with publications series, journals, meetings, or social media. Some are internationally or crossnationally constituted from the outset, while others are working to encourage more international participation.

The **European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism (ESSWE)** began in 2005 to “advance the academic study of the various manifestations of Western esotericism from late antiquity to the present.”³⁶ While it has a more narrowly defined portfolio, ESSWE holds an international conference every two years, and the journal *Aries* and the associated *Aries* book series (both published by Brill). In addition to awarding a thesis prize, the association targets its bursaries to junior scholars and scholars from the former Eastern bloc, and has a resource-rich website. The **International Study of Religion in Eastern and Central Europe Association (ISORECEA)** also has a specific geographic focus, describing itself as an international scientific association that “focuses on the exchange of academic knowledge on the situation of religion in the Central-Eastern European area.”³⁷ It was established in December 1995 after a series of conferences. Its nearly 80 members represent various disciplines, e.g. sociology, anthropology, history, philosophy, and come from diverse countries, Belarus, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Great Britain, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, Russia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Ukraine, and the USA. The association has a book series, information on the status of religion in the region, and an open-access peer-reviewed annual academic journal, *Religion and Society in Central and Eastern Europe (RASCEE)*, “reflecting critical scholarship in the study of religion in the region.”³⁸

³⁵ The 2021 SSEASR conference will take place in Myanmar.

³⁶ <http://www.esswe.org>

³⁷ <http://www.isorecea.net>

³⁸ <http://www.rascee.net/index.php/rascee>

The **International Association for the Cognitive Science of Religion (IACSR)** was founded in 2006, as “an association open to scholars from the humanities, social and natural sciences interested in explaining religious cognition and cultures as natural phenomena.”³⁹ This multidisciplinary association aims to promote excellence in the cognitive science of religion through international collaboration with scholars whose research has a bearing on the empirical investigation of religious cognition. They currently advance their work through biennial conferences and interim local meetings; the encouragement of research projects; the facilitation of scholarly publications; the exchange of information through electronic media; and by other means. The IACSR also wants to “develop vehicles to promote excellence in teaching, to support recent graduates in their respective fields, and to enhance promising research activities across disciplines.” According to Armin Geertz, Past President of the association, and current editor of their official journal, *Journal for the Cognitive Science of Religion*,⁴⁰ most of their scholarly activity is still limited to Northern (particularly Denmark) and Eastern Europe (particularly the Czech Republic), and the Netherlands. There are also North American scholars who use cognitive science of religion approaches in their work.⁴¹

The **International Society for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture (ISSRNC)** was in the making from the 1990s but eventually took off in 2005 when faculty and students in the Graduate Program in Religion and Nature at the University of Florida, spearheaded by Professor Bron Taylor,⁴² sent out an open invitation to scholars interested in forming an interdisciplinary society.⁴³ The process led to the formation of the ISSRNC at the first conference of the association in 2006. From the outset, the ISSRNC’s objective was to create an international association, a “community of scholars engaged in critical inquiry into the relationships among human beings and their diverse cultures, environments, religious beliefs and practices,” through conferences, publications, and outreach.⁴⁴ Despite initial fears of overreach, they have made significant efforts along these lines, hosting or co-hosting conferences in many countries, so far including Mexico, the Netherlands, South Africa, Italy, Australia, the Netherlands, Sweden, and the United States. A conference is planned in Turkey. They seek to build scholarly capacity in their field around the world, despite meagre funds and still only about 200 members; they have managed to fund a dozen scholars at their major conferences from less affluent regions. They have three working groups, including one on Gender and Ecology that is

³⁹ <http://www.iacsr.com/iacsr/Home.html>

⁴⁰ <https://journals.equinoxpub.com/index.php/JCSR>. The journal was founded in 2013. There is also a supplement book series, *Advances in the Cognitive Science of Religion*.

⁴¹ See, Armin W. Geertz, “Cognitive Science.” In: Michael Stausberg and Steven Engler, eds., *Oxford Handbook of the Study of Religion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 97-111.

⁴² <https://religion.ufl.edu/graduate-studies/fields-of-study/religion-nature/>

⁴³ <https://www.issrnc.org/about/history/>

⁴⁴ <https://www.issrnc.org/>

“interested to learn from those using a gender critique to approach the nature-culture nexus, both in the global south and north.”⁴⁵ The ISSRNC’s bylaws envisioned regional bodies, but these have not emerged in the Global South, although more one-off gatherings are reportedly occurring. Hot on the heels of the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature* (2005) of which Bron Taylor was the editor-in-chief,⁴⁶ and which includes 1,000 entries from 520 international contributors, the first issue of the affiliated *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature, and Culture* appeared in 2007.⁴⁷ This has also attracted an international array of authors, several of them anthropologists.

Another area of academic inquiry with international ramifications is that of new religious movements and new religious consciousness. The most internationally active scholarly association in this regard is the **Center for Studies on New Religions (CESNUR)**, founded in 1988 and directed by Massimo Introvigne out of Torino, Italy.⁴⁸ It is an affiliate of the European Association for the Study of Religions (EASR). The annual conferences that began in the early 1990s have been held in a range of European and North American universities, as well as South Korea, Jerusalem, and Taiwan more recently. They feature both research presentations and outreach to public officials and the media, owing to the controversies surrounding new religions, as well as field trips for conference participants to significant sites of new religious movements.⁴⁹ After more than thirty years of activity, the CESNUR website notes that more than 1,000 scholarly papers have been presented at the Center’s international conferences and seminars. Many have been posted on CESNUR’s website (in English, Italian, Spanish, and French), while others have been published in international journals. In 2017, the organization launched its own journal, the *Journal of CESNUR*, opting for an *online open access* journal, given the trends in international scholarly publishing.⁵⁰ The **International Society for the Study of New Religions (ISSNR)**, which is an international membership association originally formed in Sweden in 2009 for scholars of new religions, normally meets in conjunction with CESNUR conferences every two years.⁵¹

The **Society of Biblical Literature (SBL)** describes itself as “the oldest and largest learned society devoted to the critical investigation of the Bible from a variety of academic disciplines.”⁵² It is potentially the newest addition to the list of IAHR affiliates, having been recently recommended

⁴⁵ <https://www.issrnc.org/working-groups/ecology-and-gender-working-group/>

⁴⁶ <http://www.religionandnature.com/ern/>

⁴⁷ <https://www.issrnc.org/journal/about-jsrnc/>

⁴⁸ <http://www.easr.eu/cesnur/>

⁴⁹ On this and other activities of CESNUR (library, network of experts, conference cyberproceedings), see

<https://www.cesnur.org/about.htm>

⁵⁰ <https://cesnur.net/>

⁵¹ <https://www.issnr.org/about/>

⁵² <http://www.sbl-site.org/>

by the IAHR Executive Committee, pending the vote by the IAHR International Committee and admission by the next IAHR General Assembly.⁵³ Perhaps less widely known is that the SBL has been holding annual international meetings in many parts of the world since 1983.⁵⁴ The majority of these gatherings are held in European locations, with occasional meetings in Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Israel, Argentina and South Korea. The international meeting is billed as “a unique forum for international scholars who are unable to attend the North American meeting and for all who wish to engage more directly SBL's growing international membership and scholarship.”⁵⁵ There are materials on the website (such as the substantive calls for papers) and the *Review of Biblical Literature* blog that are accessible to non-members. Finally on the list of affiliated associations is the **Society for Ancient Mediterranean Religions (SAMR)** which was founded to foster the interdisciplinary study of the religions of the ancient Mediterranean basin, and especially the interaction of the multiple polytheistic religions with each other and with the emerging monotheistic religions of the region.⁵⁶ The SAMR organized a colloquy, “Religion on the Ground,” at the IAHR World Congress in Erfurt in 2015.⁵⁷

Networks

The **IAHR Women Scholars Network (IAHR-WSN)** is an IAHR initiative that was launched at the EASR conference in Bremen in 2007 to support the work of women scholars of religion around the world.⁵⁸ Morny Joy and I had become increasingly aware of the particular challenges facing women in their respective academic institutions and associations, whether discrimination, harassment, or lack of resources on or resistance to research on gender issues (see Joy 2016). Jenny Berglund and Jay Johnston took over the leadership in 2015. Thanks to the work of Canadian colleagues and graduate students, a listserv was created to supply information on grants, conferences, and publications, as well as a forum for discussion of pertinent issues. This was linked to membership in the network (no cost). Our Facebook page regularly lists job and fellowship opportunities, as well as publications and media items of interest to the group.⁵⁹ Arguably, the IAHR-WSN's greatest success lies in the meetings it has held at numerous IAHR regional (SSEASR, AASR, and EASR) conferences and world congresses over the years. These have proved popular and productive, in terms of emphasizing our academic mission, providing a safe space for professional concerns, and connecting local and international scholars for research collaboration. We also take time to celebrate our achievements and the pioneering

⁵³ <https://www.iahrweb.org/affiliates.php>

⁵⁴ <https://www.sbl-site.org/meetings/Internationalmeeting.aspx>

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ <https://samreligions.org/>

⁵⁷ <https://samreligions.org/2016/02/01/erfurt-2015-final-program/>

⁵⁸ <http://www.iahrweb.org/wsn/>

⁵⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/groups/iahrwomenscholarsnetwork/>

work of senior colleagues, as at the well-attended (over 70 participants) meeting and reception held at the 2015 Erfurt Congress.⁶⁰ There are plans afoot for an academic symposium at the Otago Congress in August 2020, entitled: "Founding Mothers and Women of Influence in the Study of Religion(s)--Past, Present, and Future."

While not an official network, one might consider the activities of scholars in the field of the study of **religious or religion education** as one such example, as they work to build their research area and expand international participation. They navigate between different associations, conferences, working groups, and publications. They have a working group in the EASR, for example, on "Religion in Public Education," which aims to "to critically study European ways of having or not having education about religion/s and to help promote a study-of-religions (SOR)/religious-studies (RS) approach to education about religion/s."⁶¹ They note that this includes individual research, networking, conferences within and outside the EASR annual framework and related publications. Their work within the EASR is now enhanced by greater participation from scholars from Eastern Europe. There is also an international (Europe-based) seminar on religious education and values that some participate in.⁶² However, while there is some improvement in the internationalization of their area of study, it is still heavily dominated by Europeans and North Americans, with the participation of some South African, Australian, and Japanese scholars. To extend their international connections, they have to work with the reality that in many parts of the world, the study of religious education may be dominated by theological scholars, as with scholars from Muslim majority countries, for example. This is reflected in recent publications such as *European Perspectives on Islamic Education*⁶³ and the new *Brill Series on Research Perspectives on Religion and Education*, both in terms of the content and the editorial board.⁶⁴

Journals and projects

In addition to the journals discussed above in relation to various scholarly associations,⁶⁵ I wish to highlight two additional journals for their exemplary roles as agents of internationalization in the study of religion. Take, for example, ***Nova Religio***, the journal that "presents scholarly interpretations and examinations of emergent and alternative religious movements."⁶⁶ While it originated (in 1997) in the work of the New Religious Movements Group (now Unit) in the

⁶⁰ For pictures of the event, see photo gallery here <http://www.iahrweb.org/wsn/>

⁶¹ <http://easr.info/easr-working-groups/public-education/>

⁶² <https://www.yorks.ac.uk/isrev/>

⁶³ <https://www.equinoxpub.com/home/european-perspectives-on-islamic-education-and-public-schooling/>

⁶⁴ https://brill.com/view/journals/rpre/1/1/article-p1_1.xml

⁶⁵ See, for example, the impressive list of national and crossnational journals associated with the EASR i <http://www.easr.info/publications/599-2/>.

⁶⁶ nr.ucpress.edu

American Academy of Religion, and all of the co-general editors and reviews editors have been North American, *Nova Religio's* principal editors insist it is international in both its scope and authors.⁶⁷ The journal's ambit was always international, but the special issues (on Africa, Melanesia, China, and other regions and countries) have brought many young scholars from around the world into new religious movements (NRM) studies. In addition to the journal's leadership in broadening NRM scholarship across cultures and historical periods, we should note the role of international conferences, such as CESNUR, INFORM,⁶⁸ AAR, and the Scientific Study of Religion (SSSR),⁶⁹ in stimulating transdisciplinary scholarship on NRMs and encouraging submissions from younger scholars, along with the growing interest in religious freedom issues, minority religious movements, religious persecution, and global terrorism. The focus in NRM studies on the "cult wars" in the U.S. has long been a thing of the past, and the field has expanded far beyond those groups and issues, now intersecting with a number of other areas of focus in religious studies.

Coming on to the scene in 2011, the *Journal of Africana Studies* has made some strategic moves to position itself at the intersection of the study of religion within African American studies and African studies, with a mission of internationalizing the journal and increasing the participation of African readers, writers, and board members. They are keen to address the challenge of getting scholars in Africa, the Americas, and Europe reading and talking to one another. The hallmark of their effort in this respect is through their recent partnering with the African Association of the Study of Religions (AASR).⁷⁰ The journal has many African academics, including several Africa-based scholars, on their board.⁷¹ They are also sponsored by the Association for the Study of the Worldwide African Diaspora,⁷² and have attended their international conference in the Dominican Republic. Africa-based scholars receive a free e-subscription to the journal. The editorial team reaches out to Africa-based scholars via Facebook and Twitter, through the AASR, and by sending a delegation to the 2020 AASR conference in Dakar, Senegal.⁷³ The new partnership's most ambitious component is the creation of pan-Atlantic research teams that will unite scholars from Africa, the Americas, and Europe for mentoring and collaborative research and writing.⁷⁴ The hope is that some of these jointly authored book manuscripts will find their way into the book series on Africana religions, also created by the founding journal editors, Edward Curtis IV and Sylvester Johnson.⁷⁵

⁶⁷ Information by email from Phillip Lucas (October 25, 2019) and Cathy Wessinger (October 25-27, 2019).

⁶⁸ <https://inform.ac>

⁶⁹ <https://sssreligion.org>

⁷⁰ <http://www.a-asr.org/partnership-with-joar/>

⁷¹ <http://africanareligions.org/editorial-board/>

⁷² <http://aswadiaspora.org/>

⁷³ <https://www.a-asr.org/cfp-9th-aasr-conference-in-africa/>

⁷⁴ <http://africanareligions.org/pan-atlantic-scholarship-initiative/>

⁷⁵ http://www.psupress.org/books/series/book_SeriesAfRel.html

We should mention in closing the efforts of the **Korean Association for Religious Studies** (established in 1970) to publish their journal in English, *Chonggyo Yeongu* (journal of religious studies) from 2010 onwards.⁷⁶ Chongsuh Kim, who served as president of the association from 2006-08 wrote a position piece, “The Concept of “Korean Religion” and Religious Studies in Korea.” Both religious studies scholars and theologians belong to the association, whose regular meetings are organized primarily by the former. The launch of the journal was linked to moves in the 1990s to invite more foreign scholars to its meetings and to encourage more Korean scholars to participate in AAR or IAHR meetings. They receive support from the Korean Research Foundation.

CLOSING REMARKS

In this essay on international perspectives in/on the field of religious studies, I opted to focus on the evolving work of scholarly organizations and initiatives, rather than on scholarship per se—even though the two are obviously interconnected. If there are commonalities, whether explicit or implicit, in the above case studies, they might be summarized as follows:

- a) tokenism is passé
- b) international collaboration pays off
- c) hubs and flows are shifting
- d) international work is labor-intensive and costly
- e) new opportunities abound for traveling, communicating, networking, and publishing
- f) political, economic, environmental, linguistic, and institutional realities loom large

In other words, postcoloniality, decoloniality, diversity, and globalization are now part and parcel of our global academic environment and thereby call for conceptual and practical engagement, as advocated by several of the contributors to the 50th anniversary issue of the journal, *Religion*, in fall 2019, on the “Future of the Study of Religion/s.”⁷⁷ Ramping up international collaboration and solidarity can bring new attention to marginalized voices⁷⁸ and overlooked theories in the academy.⁷⁹ It can trigger much-needed processes of decentering

⁷⁶ Koars.org. It had been published since the beginnings of the association in Korean. Email from Chongsuh Kim, November 4, 2019.

⁷⁷ See, e.g., van Klinken 2019 and Day 2019.

⁷⁸ This has become integral to the various [projects on religion and global politics](#) that Elizabeth Shakman Hurd has (co-)directed in recent years at Northwestern University. She claims that her international visits and work with local scholars in various countries informed her efforts to decenter the American experience and recenter the rest of the world vis-a-vis the law and politics of religious difference and diversity. Email communication, October 25, 2019.

⁷⁹ Satoko Fujiwara (2019) makes a strong case for theoretical and methodological pluralism because of the failure of Western scholars to understand the theoretical orientation of Japanese scholars in their interpretation of contemporary religion and culture in Japan.

and recentering in terms of where we think *from*, and what and who we think *with*, in our disciplinary areas.⁸⁰ It can also bring greater awareness of the inter- and transdisciplinary moves that particular dispensations compel.⁸¹ It brings to our attention new knowledge and funding hubs in the study of religion/s.⁸² Finally, international work can dispel any complacency about the ever-growing threats to our academic freedom by “neoliberal rationality” (Scott 2019: 79).⁸³

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⁸⁰ This is cogently argued by Birgit Meyer (2019) in her contribution to the *Religion* anniversary issue, “Remapping our Mindset: Towards a Transregional and Pluralistic Outlook.”

⁸¹ See Fujiwara 2019 on the rethinking of the interdisciplinarity and relevance of research in Japan.

⁸² For example, the Canadian research project on Buddhism and East Asian Religions known as FROGBEAR, where Chinese scholars operate independently, reconstituting China as a center for research on Chinese religions (<https://frogbear.org/>). Moreover, most Chinese conferences on Chinese religions invite at least a couple of international scholars (often from Korea, Japan, Europe, or North America, but sometimes from South or SE Asia), but mainly feature scholars from China. Email from Megan Bryson, October 28, 2019.

⁸³ See a recent initiative by Kenyan scholars of religion to counter these trends, “Reimagining the African Academy: Towards a Humanities-Science Nexus.” <http://www.a-asr.org/call-for-anthology-contributions-reimagining-the-african-academy/> (accessed November 12, 2019).

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