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.1

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 of 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

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1 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 Institute for Cognition and Culture, Queen's University of Belfast.
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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 members 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 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