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AASR Finances: Its Past its Future?

Introduction

It seems opportune, for several reasons, to present a survey of the history of AASR finances. One reason is a letter Frans Wijzen, AASR Representative for Europe since July 2007, sent me. During the AASR conference in Gaborone he volunteered to serve in that office after Gerrie ter Haar had reported that Henk van Rinsum had requested to be relieved from that office. Frans wrote to me (in Dutch):

‘In Botswana, I was jolted into the office of AASR Representative for Europe in a chaotic meeting. I have a feeling that I have not really found my bearings as yet in this office’.

Another reason is a happy new phenomenon: the intense, at times heated spate of electronic exchanges about AASR finances among members of the AASR Executive since I raised the question whether the editors of AASR Bulletin might go ahead and print *AASR Bulletin* 31, preferably from Gaborone.¹ A third reason is that a factual report of the past will allow us to see where we have come from, how far we have progressed, and how we should proceed towards an AASR which is financially healthy and transparent. E.g. whom should we elect to serve as AASR Treasurer and as AASR Regional or National Representatives in charge of the systematic collection of annual membership fees? By presenting the facts of the past I hope to temper the passion of the present debate and build consensus on how we should lay the foundation of an AASR that is financially strong in at least a basic manner. A fourth reason is the nagging question: Will the financial past of the AASR also be its future?

I present the history below in three parts: from 1992 to 2000; from 2000 to 2005; and from 2005 to now. In my conclusion I return to the nagging question.

¹ In an e-mail message to the members of the AASR Executive of 5 October 2009

1992-2000

I responded to Frans Wijzen as follows: ‘The AASR-Europe account was administered very effectively by Gerrie [ter Haar] from 1993 to 2006. It was the main, and usually the only operational source of money of, and for, the AASR till 2005. The production of AASR Bulletins was paid from it,² as well as the development and maintenance of the AASR website. The remainder was used for other general AASR purposes, such as supporting AASR members from Africa to attend conferences (e.g. at Nairobi in 1999, and Legon, Ghana, in 2004) and congresses (e.g. the IAHR congresses at Durban in 2000 and at Tokyo in 2005); and AASR-related publications’.

However, this response does not do full justice to history, for it overlooks that Rosalind Hackett, who served as Representative for North America from 1993 till 1998,³ did also collect annual dues in that period, as did Abdulkader Tayob as AASR Representative for Southern Africa from 1993 to 2000 in South (and Southern?) Africa. For in 1995 it is mentioned in *AASR Newsletter* 4 (November 1995) that the North American account stood at US\$ 1719.46, that the European account held approximately US\$ 5000 (through a donation of US\$ 3000), and that the South African account contained US\$ 180.⁴ In addition, Rosalind, Gerrie and Simeon Ilesanmi⁵ regularly appealed to members in the newsletter to pay their annual dues (US\$ 50).⁶ However, no annual financial reports were published in 1996 and 1997, to the dismay of some AASR members. They raised this issue at the meeting of the AASR Executive in May 1998 in Hildesheim, Germany. There it was resolved ‘that a financial report [will] be published in every issue of the newsletter’.⁷

2000-2005

In consequence of that decision, the first a bit more detailed financial report was published in 2001 in *AASR Newsletter* 15/16. It reported the income from annual dues collected: US\$ 2336 in the European account, and US\$ 1227 in the North

² Not their shipment. They were sent through Utrecht University mail.

³ In 1998, Simeon Ilesanmi took over from her till 2000.

⁴ *AASR Newsletter* 4 (November 1995): 3

⁵ Simeon stood in for Rosalind Hackett as AASR Representative for North America from 1998 to 2000.

⁶ In *AASR Newsletter* 1 (September 1993): 18; *AASR Newsletter* 4 (November 1995): 3; *AASR Newsletter* 8 (November 1997): 3; *AASR Newsletter* 11 (June 1999): 3-4; *AASR Newsletter* 12 (November 1999): 2.

⁷ *AASR Newsletter* (November 1998) 10: 1.

American account – US\$ 575 being collected in annual dues from AASR-NA members in 1999-2000. It also mentioned the items on which money had been spent: US\$ 800 was contributed from the European account towards the publication of the proceedings of the IAHR conference in Harare in September 1992 at which the AASR was founded.⁸ And it reported that US\$ 300 had been spent from the American account for [mailing out?] the ‘AASR Newsletter’; another US\$ 300 as a subsidy to Florida Press for an AASR publication; and US\$ 600 as a subsidy for the IAHR Congress in Durban in 2000. The report also showed that the European account held a balance of US\$ 1326.15, and the North American of US\$ 526.82.⁹

The AASR had a Treasurer only from 2000 onwards, when Jim Cox was elected to the dual office of General Secretary and Treasurer.¹⁰ In their meeting at Thurnau Castle, near Bayreuth, Germany,¹¹ in October 2001, AASR members insisted again on the need for regular financial reports from all AASR regions, and required that the Treasurer take care of their coordination and publication.¹² In response, the Treasurer acknowledged in 2002 that ‘central co-ordination is vital for communication to flow smoothly’. But he also insisted that despite electronic communication the gathering in of information from ‘a vast continent’ poses ‘a formidable challenge’ and ‘creates particular challenges to [the] central financial reporting’. He added:

I have not included a financial report. I have decided to wait until the end of the year to compile statistics from the various regions. I will be asking therefore all regional representatives to provide me with their financial statements early in January, so that I can make a full financial statement in the next issue of the AASR Newsletter. Thereafter, a financial report can be expected to appear in the first issue of the newsletter in each year.¹³

⁸ Jan Platvoet, James Cox & Jacob Olupona (eds.) 1996, *The Study of Religions in Africa: Past, Present and Prospects; Proceedings of the Regional Conference of the International Association for the History of Religions, Harare, Zimbabwe, 1992*. Cambridge: Roots and Branches (*Religions of Africa*, 1).

⁹ *AASR Newsletter* 15/16 (May- November 2000): 11-12. No figures were reported for South Africa.

¹⁰ Teresia Hinga was elected as AASR Representative for North America. Isabel Phiri, elected as Representative for Southern Africa, soon resigned, which threw the co-ordination of that region into confusion till 2007. See *AASR Newsletter* 14 (November 2000): 17-18 for all the officers elected to serve in the period 2000-2005.

¹¹ For a conference organised by Bayreuth University.

¹² *AASR Newsletter* 15/16 (May/November 2001), 5-12

¹³ Jim Cox 2001, ‘The AASR Aims & Finances’, *AASR Newsletter* 15/16 (May/November 2001), 2-4

In 2003, however, the Treasurer had to report that he had received no financial reports apart from that of the AASR Representative for Europe.¹⁴ He expressed the hope that the financial issue could be discussed ‘face to face’ during the AASR conference in Ghana in 2004. He expected that as a result by 2005, when the AASR would meet in Tokyo, ‘a clear system for membership, reporting and financial accountability should be operating’.¹⁵

The financial issue, however, remained unresolved at Legon, Ghana, where the Treasurer had to report that he ‘had received just one financial report during the past year, that from Professor ter Haar, the European Representative’.¹⁶

And in March 2005, in the AASR Business Meeting during the IAHR congress at Tokyo, the Treasurer reported again, that he ‘had received a [financial] report from the European Regional Representative, Prof. Gerrie ter Haar, but that he had received no other reports’.¹⁷ The European financial account for 2003 was added. It showed a balance of € 3.456,70 on 31st December 2003, had spent € 777,75 in 2003 on the production of *AASR Newsletter* 18 and 19, and had gathered in € 1.7060,13 as membership fees for 2003.¹⁸ As was the European financial account for 2004. It reported that €1.740 had been gathered in as annual membership fees in 2004; that € 681 had been spent on the production of *AASR Bulletins* 20 and 21; and that the balance amounted to € 4.496 on 31.-12.2004.¹⁹ Gerrie ter Haar also reported that ‘a number of bursaries for Africans to attend the IAHR Congress in Tokyo’ had been paid from the European account.²⁰

¹⁴ *AASR Newsletter* 19 (May 2003): 4-5. For the European financial statement of 2003, cf. *AASR Newsletter* 19 (May 2003): 6. The European account showed a balance of Euro 2345,57.

¹⁵ *AASR Newsletter* 18 (November 2002), 2-3.

¹⁶ *AASR Bulletin* 21 (May 2004): 7. He also reported that he had been working on establishing ‘national representatives’ in Southern African countries to remedy the vacuum created by the resignation of Isabel Phiri. Jannie Smit (University of KwaZulu/Natal at Durban) had accepted the role of overall southern African representative, but ‘because countries in the region were organising their own membership and had committed to raising local funds for meetings and distribution of the newsletter, it seemed reasonable to contact individual [national] representatives’, to wit Ezra Chitando for Zimbabwe, Marja Hinfelaar for Zambia, and Seratwa Kuswani for Botswana (*AASR Bulletin* 21 [May 2004]: 6). Jannie Smit thereby factually became the national representative for South Africa, and was only nominally the Representative for Southern Africa. The Treasurer did, however, urge the national representatives that they set ‘a local membership fee, which could be used for occasional national or regional meetings and for the distribution of the newsletter’ (*AASR Bulletin* 21 [May 2004]: 7).

¹⁷ *AASR Bulletin* 23 (May 2005): 4

¹⁸ *AASR Bulletin* 23 (May 2005): 5

¹⁹ *AASR Bulletin* 23 (May 2005): 21

²⁰ *AASR Bulletin* 23 (May 2005): 5-6, 16, 28

The Representative for North America, Teresia Hinga, reported that ‘the North American Region had received funds but had been limited by not having a proper bank account for the transmission of funds. She indicated that this problem was being addressed’.²¹ Adam Chepkwony, Representative for East Africa, reported that ‘although he had hoped to introduce the payment of membership fees, this had not occurred yet’.²² The Representatives for West Africa and Southern Africa did not attend and had not sent in reports.²³

In conclusion, from 1998 to 2005, the European account seems to have been the sole source of income of the AASR. There was no 40/60% division: all AASR expenses were paid from that account. I have not found evidence that AASR-NA contributed to AASR finances. There were only weak attempts to impress upon the AASR regions in Africa that they too should set a local annual membership fee, to be used for local purposes, such as the distribution of the *AASR Newsletter* (renamed *AASR Bulletin* in 2004). However, no membership dues were collected in Africa till 2005, with one exception: from 2004, the 10 AASR members in Zambia paid an annual fee,²⁴ for a number of years. There was no ‘central treasury’ in the period 1993-2005. AASR had appointed a Treasurer in 2000 but he had no bank account and an empty purse.

2005-now

In his report to the AASR General Meeting in Tokyo on 26 March 2005, the Treasurer announced that the incoming AASR Representative for North America, Prof. Kathleen O’Brien Wicker, had informed him that she would reform the AASR-NA collection of membership fees and redress its failure to contribute to the financial needs of the AASR.²⁵ Prof. Wicker outlined an ambitious program on behalf of AASR-NA.²⁶ Its first goal was ‘to regularise the status of AASR-NA as a tax-exempt organisation under the US Tax Code’, for that would ‘enable the AASR in North America to be more effective in fund raising’. Its second goal would be a membership drive, not only in the USA but also in Canada. That would bring in more membership fees, which would ‘allow the AASR in North America to contribute more to the general projects sponsored by the AASR and increase the vitality of its activities and programs’. Thirdly, she in-

²¹ *AASR Bulletin* 23 (May 2005): 7

²² *AASR Bulletin* 23 (May 2005): 6

²³ *AASR Bulletin* 23 (May 2005): 5

²⁴ *AASR Bulletin* 27&28 (May/November 2007): 11.

²⁵ *AASR Bulletin* 23 (May 2005): 4

²⁶ See *AASR Bulletin* 23 (May 2005): 14-15.

tended to ‘regularize and hopefully increase North American contributions to the AASR at large, in addition to undertaking fundraising for the organization’.²⁷

Tax-exempt status for AASR-NA was costly affair because a law firm had to be hired.²⁸ In view of this, and other AASR-NA projects, Kathleen O’Brien Wicker proposed a ‘revenue sharing agreement of 60-40%’ in the maiden meeting of the incoming AASR Executive at Tokyo. AASR-NA would retain 60% of its income from annual membership fees for its own projects, and contribute the remaining 40% to ‘AASR at large’,²⁹ i.e. to its ‘central treasury’ for AASR ‘general needs’, such as the financing of the AASR Bulletin, the AASR website, AASR publications, sponsoring African scholars for conferences and congresses, etc.

In the same maiden meeting in Tokyo, the new AASR Executive resolved to make ‘all individual [...] members, in Africa and beyond, [...] financially responsible to the Association [...] in compliance with Article 4a of the AASR Constitution’.³⁰ That is, it decided that all AASR members, also those in Africa, should pay a membership fee once a year. It fixed the rate for AASR members in Africa at US\$ 10. It permitted the regions in Africa to retain and use them for their own expenses and projects. But it also required that ‘at the end of every year, regional representatives [should] furnish the AASR Secretariat with financial reports in order that the AASR Treasurer may publish an [overall] annual financial report in the AASR Bulletin’.³¹ It encouraged that ‘national representatives [take] up complementary roles to that of regional representatives [...] for the smooth running of regional bodies’.³² It also devised sanctions against members who failed to pay their annual membership dues. It decided that the Members-Only part of the AASR website would be ‘a forum for sharing privileged information among dues-paying members only’, and that ‘the AASR Bulletin will no longer be distributed freely’.³³

In the next bulletin, the AASR President again stressed ‘the need for us to have a paid up membership to support the organizational and other expenses of

²⁷ *AASR Bulletin* 23 (May 2005): 14

²⁸ The project seems to have been abandoned in 2006 (e-mail message from Kathleen O’Brien Wicker to me, dated 5 May 2006), probably because it proved too expensive.

²⁹ The minutes of the maiden meeting of the incoming AASR Executive (in *AASR Bulletin* 23 [May 2003]: 16-20) unfortunately do not record that this proposal of revenue sharing was approved. I learned about it only in September 2006 from an e-mail from Kathleen O’Brien Wicker to the AASR Executive, sent on 13.09.2006.

³⁰ *AASR Bulletin* 23 (May 2005): 17.

³¹ *AASR Bulletin* 23 (May 2005): 16-17

³² *AASR Bulletin* 23 (May 2005): 17-18

³³ *AASR Bulletin* 23 (May 2005): 19; repeated in *AASR Bulletin* 24 (November 2005): 2

the Association'.³⁴ The General Secretary re-iterated that only fee-paying members would have access to the Members-Only area of the AASR website, and that there would be no more free AASR bulletins. From 2006 onwards, October/November would be the deadline for payment of the membership dues for the upcoming year. If a member had not paid the membership fee for two consecutive years, his or her status was to be 'reviewed'. The Regional and National Representatives were responsible for the collection and administration of the annual dues. The 40/60%, agreed upon at Tokyo for AASR-NA, was now extended to all AASR regions: 'all incoming dues shall be allocated to the AASR Treasurer and to each region on the basis of the 40-60% formula'.³⁵ The General Secretary also announced that more National Representatives had been appointed: Kwabena Asamoah Gyadu for Ghana; for Nigeria: David Ogunbile, Oyeronke Olajubu, and Antonia Essien; John Khamalwa for Uganda; Musa Dube for Botswana; S.T. Kgatla for South Africa; Ibrahim Boutchich for North Africa;³⁶ and Felix Kaputu for Central Africa.³⁷

Despite this firm resolve of the AASR Executive in 2005 to make the AASR a financially viable organization – in however modest a manner – by putting in place a system of annual dues collection and transparency in their administration throughout the AASR, so far little progress towards that goal has been made.

From 2006 to now [2009], only one financial report has been published.³⁸ It reports that € 2.390 had been gathered in as annual membership dues into the AASR European account in 2005, and US\$ 970 into the AASR North American account. From the European account € 2867 had been paid to support the participation in the IAHR congress at Tokyo of two AASR members from Africa; € 851 for the production of AASR Bulletins; and € 762 for the construction of the AASR website. The North American account mentioned US\$ 200 as expenditure for mailing out AASR Bulletin.

AASR-NA was the only AASR account from which annual 40% transfers have been made to the AASR central account since 2005.³⁹ The number of fee-paying members of AASR-NA has increased from 17 in 2005 to some 40 now. Apart from 40% transfers, that money was spent on the organisation of annual

³⁴ Elom Dovlo, 'From the Chair', in *AASR Bulletin* 24 (November 2005): 1

³⁵ Afe Adogame, 'From the Desk of the Secretary', in *AASR Bulletin* 24 (November 2005): 1-3, here p. 2.

³⁶ He resigned from this office in 2007 (*AASR Bulletin* 27&28: 11).

³⁷ *AASR Bulletin* 24 (November 2005): 2-3.

³⁸ *AASR Bulletin* 25 (May 2006): 2

³⁹ Their amounts have not yet been made public, because no financial reports have been published in AASR Bulletins since the one on 2005 published in *AASR Bulletin* 25.

AASR-NA meetings in November of each year in conjunction with the annual AAR, SBL and other major congresses

The administration of the European account went through a protracted transfer, first from Gerrie ter Haar to Henk van Rinsum in 2005-2007, and then from Gerrie ter Haar to Frans Wijsen in 2007-2008. This may also have affected the systematic collection of annual dues from AASR members in Europe in those years. It has now been put in order again by Frans Wijsen.

When the valiant attempts of the General Secretary to raise funds for the Third AASR Conference in Africa on 'Health, Healing and the Study of the Religions of Africa', planned for July 2007 at the University of Botswana, failed in 2006-2007, an awkward situation arose. The central treasury contained as yet only two tiny AASR-NA 40% transfers. The AASR European account was a bit in disarray. And the Local Organising Committee at the University of Botswana had not been informed of the poor state the AASR was in financially, and was expecting that the AASR would cover the costs of the organisation of the conference. The report of the Treasurer on the costs of this conference, and the IAHR subsidy, has unfortunately not been published yet. It should have been included in *AASR Bulletin* 29&30 (November 2008/May 2009); it will hopefully be published in the forthcoming *AASR Bulletin* 31 (November 2009).

Only incidental information is available on whether or not AASR regions and nations in Africa have begun to collect annual membership dues after 2005. It was reported during the AASR General Meeting at the University of Botswana in July 2007 that the membership fees paid by the ten AASR members in Zambia from 2004 to 2007 had been used to support the participation of one of them in that conference.⁴⁰ It was also reported in the same meeting that five members had paid membership dues in Kenya 'for the current year' (2007); that Nigeria had 'a fee-paying membership of twenty', and Botswana of five.⁴¹

Because of lack of response to the pleas of the Treasurer that AASR regions and nations in Africa send him information on whether or not they collect membership fees systematically, the Treasurer has so far not been able to publish a financial report detailing for all AASR regions and nations how much money each has collected and how these have been spent. Nor do we know whether or not accounts are kept of the members who have faithfully paid the membership dues in the past few years, and those who have not. Without such accounts the rule instituted by the AASR Executive in Tokyo in March 2005 – that defaulting

⁴⁰ *AASR Bulletin* 27&28 (May/November 2007): 11

⁴¹ *AASR Bulletin* 27&28 (May/November 2007): 11

AASR members be removed from the AASR Register of Members – cannot be put into practice. Cutting back the AASR membership to fee-paying members only, however, seems a *conditio sine qua non* for a financially healthy AASR. Likewise, an annual report that accounts for all the membership fees collected, and for all other income such as IAHR subsidies for AASR conferences, and that also details precisely the items on which the money held in the central, regional and national accounts have been spent, is a *conditio sine qua non* for achieving financial transparency. Such clarity is necessary to forestall unrealistic expectations on the part of AASR members in respect of support for attending conferences and congresses, the organisation of AASR conferences in Africa, and subsidies for AASR publications; and for showing AASR members that the fees they pay are spent exclusively on the AASR aims detailed at the rear cover of each AASR Bulletin; and that it is therefore in their own interest to continue to pay their annual membership fees.

Its past its future?

AASR-Europe currently has 43 members. Their €60 annual membership fee should amount to approximately € 2.500, or US\$ 3.678,⁴² per annum.⁴³ AASR-North America has some 40 members. Their US\$ 60 annual membership fee should amount to US\$ 2.400 per annum. The AASR regions and nations in Africa have a total membership of slightly over 150 at present.⁴⁴ Their US\$ 10 annual membership fee should total to US\$ 1.500 per annum. So, if all current AASR members would pay their annual membership fee faithfully, AASR would have a secure annual income of US\$ 7.500.

AASR revenue is likely to be much lower, however, in the years ahead. Two situations may obtain. One is that AASR Representatives in Africa continue the current praxis of no or unsystematic fee collection without financial accountability for what has been collected. In that case, AASR in Africa is likely to grow in number of members but will not only not contribute to the financial vitality of the AASR, but will endanger the very existence of the AASR. AASR in Africa is likely then to become the parasitic outgrowth of the AASR that will soon kill this continental and global association of scholars of the religions of Africa.

⁴² at the conversion rate of 3 November 2009

⁴³ I am disregarding the reduced fees for the non-salaried for the moment, and the subscriptions to AASR Bulletin by libraries, publishers, etc. They latter bring in more or less what is 'lost' in the former.

⁴⁴ Nigeria has currently 51 members; East Africa has 40; Ghana has 23; South Africa has 18; Zimbabwe has 10; Zambia has 8; Botswana has 5; and Namibia has 2.

The other situation is that AASR Representatives in Africa do institute the systematic collection and annual reporting of membership dues that was decided upon by AASR Executive in Tokyo in March 2005. In that case, the number of AASR members in Africa will probably be reduced significantly because a portion of the current membership will fail to pay the membership fees and be de-registered after two years for failure to pay them. So, whichever of these two situations will obtain, AASR revenue is likely to be much lower than US\$ 7.500.

AASR will be financially healthy, however, only when its past is not its future. I appeal therefore to the AASR Nominations Committee 2010-2015 to nominate only those AASR members as candidates for the posts of Regional or National Representatives who explicitly declare that they will gather in systematically the annual membership dues in their region or nation, or will see to it that they are collected. They should also express that they will send in to the AASR Treasurer each year in January an annual account of the revenues and expenditures of the previous year in order that the Treasurer may publish an overall financial account in the May *AASR Bulletin*.

AASR needs to weed out parasitism by the systematic collection of annual dues and thereby achieve a basic financial health. And it needs annual accounts in order to become financially fully transparent. That is the case when all AASR members know precisely what revenue has been gathered in from dues, subsidies and fund raising, and what money has been spent on which AASR goal. Only after the AASR finances have become fully transparent can AASR members exercise their democratic rights, as fee-paying members, whether through elections or through debate in AASR General Meetings, to contest the particular financial choices that were made by the Treasurer or others in office, if they feel the money should have been spent for a different AASR goal.