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An Impromptu Report

4th AASR Conference in Africa on: Religion, Environment and Sustainable Development in Africa Ile-Ife, Nigeria, 17th-21st January 2010

On my return home, on 24th January, I found an e-mail from Rosalind Hackett asking how the Ile-Ife conference had gone. I send her the following impromptu report, which I have slightly adapted.

The book of abstracts of this conference has 58 pages and contains the 106 paper proposals (title and summary) that were accepted by the Local Organizers, Dr. David Ogunbile (Ile-Ife) and Dr. Oyeronke Olademo (Ilorin). So, there was great interest in this conference. Not all made it to the conference, however. The list of those who actually read a paper has 58 names (as well as their institutions, and e-mail addresses). Jacob Olupona, Matthews Ojo and others expressed gratitude and pride that participants from as many as 23 different Nigerian institutions in Religious Studies attended. This conference was therefore not only a major event for the AASR and Ile-Ife, but also for scholarship in religions in Nigeria.

On Monday 18th, early in the morning, we received the colourful 14 page programme of the conference. It listed the Aims of the AASR; its Executive; General Information; the Profiles of the three Guest Speakers; and the schedule of the sessions.

Time keeping was poor. After from the opening on Monday 18 by the Deputy VC, during which the Oni of Ife came in belatedly, and a few more speeches, Mercy Oduyeye presented her keynote note lecture (no title, no summary) in her usual powerful way. But its contents were that theological and 'inspirational' that I have already lost all recollection of them. After tea break there were three parallel sessions: two on Dialectics of Religion and the Environment, with three and four papers each, and a third with three papers on African Religion and Environmental Issues. In the afternoon, from 15.00 to 17.00 hrs, there were two parallel sessions, with six and five papers on Religion, the Environment and Development Issues; and from 17.15 to 18.45 hrs, again three parallel sessions, with four or three papers each, on Comparative Perspectives on New Religious Movements and Public Space. Not all of those listed for these sessions had actually arrived, which relieved pressure of time somewhat, but the paper presenters did not always have the luxury of 20 minutes presentation time. From 6.30 to 8.00 pm, we were the guests of the VC at his lodge for a 'cocktail party' (food and drinks). After that, the AASR Executive, in as far as present (Afe Adogame, Jim Cox, Matthews Ojo, Adam arap Chepkwony, Frans Wijzen, and myself) met to discuss AASR matters and prepare for the General AASR meeting.

On Tuesday 19th, I presented my plenary lecture 'Demography as Apocalypse?' at 9 o'clock, with PPP (PowerPoint presentation) slides. I noted the huge demographic explosion of humankind in the 20th century and presented an approach to the long term history of religions of humankind, from palaeolithic times till now, in which demography has a central role. I did that by showing that the general history of religions may be studied as conditioned and constrained by the history of human societies. I discerned four epochal turning points: the Neolithic Revolution; the agrarian revolution, the first Axial Age, and the Second Axial Age. They produce five kinds of societies: hunter/gatherer, early food producing, city states, empires with literate elites, and globalising societies; and six types of religions: forager, horticultural, pastoral, the 'national' religions of city states and empires, transnational religions, and globalising religions. I summarised that approach in a 'trumpet scheme'. That scheme graphically shows humankind's immense breeding success since the 17th century. And I confessed that I had always told my students in the past that if ever there was a 'trumpet of apocalypse', it was this outline of human demography by the trumpet scheme.

That took me to the second, methodological part of my paper. Does the demographic explosion indeed spell apocalyptic doom for humankind, as most people think? And if so, was I, as scholar of religion, correct in calling it ‘apocalyptic’? My answer to both questions was negative. I told my audience that scholars of religions have a descriptive and analytical task, but no moral charge; and that we should not only investigate the presumed positive role religions may perhaps play in matters of population dynamics and sustainability of the climate, but must also study their negative effects on these processes. I added that I expected but meagre results from an investigation how much religions currently actually contributed to staying the predicted ecological doom. I suggested that, instead of researching how religions affect population dynamics, we should investigate how religions are affected by the dynamics of demography. I used the example of the recent persecution of ‘child witches’ in Akwa Ibom, reported on Dutch TV in early January 2010, to press this point home. The lecture was well received, it seems. Mercy Oduyoye came up to me after the lecture to thank me for keeping God out completely.

A revised schedule was handed out early on Tuesday. Before tea at 11.30, there were three parallel sessions with six papers on Religion, Gender & Development, four on Religion, Environment & Popular Culture, and six on Religion & Environment in Contestation. After tea break we had two more parallel sessions, one with six papers on Religion and Environment in Contestation, and one on Dialectics of Religion and the Environment with four papers. After three o’clock we had as many as four parallel sessions on Religion and Ethics, two with five papers, and two with four papers each.

After them we held the AASR Business Meeting. It was very well attended. It had an agenda of thirteen points. It made transparent to the audience what the AASR is about, what it offers, what problems we face, especially financially, and that therefore AASR members need to pay their annual dues. It was most gratifying to learn that AASR Members in Nigeria had resolved that they should raise their annual membership fee from (the Naira equivalent of) US\$ 10 to US\$ 30.

On Wednesday 20, the plenary lecture was by Tunde Lawuyi. Its title was: ‘The Flood is Over: What is Recoverable: Shango Example and the Challenge of Memory in Crisis Situation in Nigeria’. In as far as I could follow his Nigerian English and complex text, he offered a good exercise in the sociology of memory. In the discussions after his lecture, I could follow him much better when he entered into

a lively interaction with his audience. After his lecture, two parallel sessions were held, with three papers each, on Religion and Ethnographies of Healing; and after the tea break two more of three and four papers on Theology, Spirituality and the Environment.

Immediately after it one party of some 15 participants went with packed lunches on an excursion to Osogbo, Osun State capital, at an hour's drive, to visit the shrine of Osun and the park in which Susan Wengler, sometime wife of Ulli Beier, had built her monumental sculptures to visualise her ideas of Yoruba religion. Dr. Oyeronke Olademo, of Ilorin University and organiser of the conference together with David Ogunbile, led this excursion. She showed us the house where Susan Wengler had lived – she had died a month ago at the age of 100!! – and later introduced us to the priest and priestess of Osun. It was a moving experience, and one which you would have enjoyed greatly.

The other participants in the conference were taken on a tour of Ile-Ife that afternoon. At six, we all congregated at Jacob Olupona's residence in Ile-Ife where he treated us to a sumptuous meal and was praised for all he had done for the AASR and for Nigeria scholarship in the study of religions.

On Thursday 21, we first had a presentation, with video, by Melissa Browning (Loyola University, Chicago) and Damaris Parsitau (Egerton University, Kenya) about their research among HIV-infected women in the fishery industry on the shore of Lake Victoria in Tanzania. Its title: Practising Postcolonial Feminist Theology Crossculturally: A Reflection on Exploring Global Feminist Theologies Pedagogy Project. It was followed by a plenary panel on the Academic Study of Religion in Nigeria from several perspectives, chaired by Jacob Olupona. He looked at it from a phenomenological perspective; Dapo F. Asaju from a theological perspective; Muibe Opeloye from an Islamic Studies perspective; Oyeronke Olademo from a Gender Studies perspective; and Matthews Ojo from a New Religious Movements perspective. After that we had the concluding General Session in which Gerrie ter Haar, Jim Cox and Jacob Olupona presented their summaries of what this conference had been about.

So, by lunch time this conference came to an end. International Participants were then invited to a nice lunch at the Conference Centre, offered to us by the Members of Staff of the OAU Department of Religious Studies. Most participants left that afternoon. A few the next day. On that Friday, David and Matthews took Gerrie ter Haar, Frans Wijssen, two other international participants and me in the afternoon

over the whole campus and showed us the Department. There we also met the Acting Chair, Dr. Elisha O. Babalola. On Saturday morning we left for Lagos Airport, with two other lady participants who joined us as far as Ibadan. On the Ibadan-Lagos highway we made a stop at km. 48, Redemption City, the huge site, earlier termed Redemption Camp, of the Redeemed Christian Church of God. We visited its new Redeemer's University and were taken over the whole site. We were deeply impressed by its 1 km. long new auditorium that can seat over 10 million faithful.

The two organisers, David Ogunbile and Oyeronke Olademo have done a splendid job for OAU, AASR and Nigerian scholarship in religions by organising this conference. It truly is a milestone in the history of AASR. It also allowed for intense interaction between Gerrie ter Haar, Jim Cox, Afe Adogame, Frans Wijzen and me with Jacob Olupona, Matthews Ojo, Adam arap Chepkwony, David Ogunbile, Oyeronke Olademo and others. We also were able to iron out quite a number of hurt feelings, misunderstandings, etc. and discuss by what new AASR Executive we may achieve even better results in the next five years. We even found a way, hopefully, to save the publication of the volume of papers proceeding from the Second AASR Conference at Legon in 2004; and a way of cutting costs on the production and shipment of future AASR Bulletins. Lastly, I even saw the miracle of Friday Mbon rising from the dead by re-appearing, together with other Calabar colleagues, on the AASR scene.

As quite a number of those who had registered did not make it to the conference, I expect that the organisers still have a small stock of the programme and book of abstracts and other documents pertaining to the Ile-Ife conference. I suggest that you write to them and request copies of them in order that you may see for yourself what this conference was about. I suggest also that they send copies to members of the AASR Executive and other senior AASR members who were unable to attend.

I trust that David Ogunbile and Oyeronke Olademo will round off their job equally well in a year or so by gathering the best papers presented at this conference in a fine volume of selected proceedings that will honour OAU and Nigerian scholarship in religions, and will stand as a monument to this memorable conference.