

Prenotandum; This third AASR website progress report was published in *AASR Bulletin* 29 (May 2008): 2-7

Jan G. Platvoet
AASR Webmaster

www.a-asr.org

Progress Report, III¹

Six important developments have taken place with respect to the AASR website (www.a-asr.org). Three of these are positive: it is growing fast; an Assistant Webmaster has been found to provide help in moderating it; and the AASR website has been transferred from my son's private server to a commercial server at very moderate cost to the AASR. Three are negative: its e-mail facility for the AASR Executive and for AASR conferences has been closed down, as has the AASR Members-Only Forums facility. And the Site Statistics page is currently 'down'.² As an electronic archive, the AASR website is still embryonical. I touch on all these points in this report. I conclude it with a vote of thanks.

Expansion to date

To date (30.06.2009), 841 documents have been posted on the AASR website, some for only a few weeks or months but over half of them (480) permanently. The former group consists mostly of documents with a deadline in a few weeks or months such as calls for papers, adverts of vacancies, and scholarships and research grants on offer. The latter category has expanded greatly for a number of reasons. One is that 213 AASR members have now been registered online.³ As each registration requires a separate document, as do their 'regions' and 'nations', the website has grown by this online register by some 220 documents. The register is in the

¹ See AASR Bulletin 25 (May 2006): 13-16, and AASR Bulletin 26 (November 2006): 18-20, for my first and second report.

² I also thought that the Search and Find facility (<http://www.a-asr.org/index.php?id=4>) of the AASR website was still completely embryonical, as I had never yet used it nor taken time to find out what procedures a Webmaster should follow to develop it. To my surprise, however, I just found that is not embryonical at all but operational. When I enter 'Dovlo', I am given 5 hits; and when I enter 'Platvoet', it even returns 12 hits.

³ At: <http://www.a-asr.org/index.php?id=252>

Members-Only area of the AASR website. All those, and only those, who are registered online, have been granted access to that restricted part of the AASR website. They have all been informed in an e-mail message how to log in to it by a User Name and Password.

Valid, i.e. working, e-mail addresses are crucial in this operation, as they are in all AASR electronic communication. Therefore, only those AASR members whose working e-mail address I possess are now registered online.⁴ The 34 members who are not yet registered online⁵ are mostly members who joined the AASR before 2000 when AASR registration did not yet require them to list their e-mail addresses. In 2005, AASR had 55 of these ‘lost sheep’ (without a (working) e-mail address).⁶ As a ‘good shepherd’, I regularly searched for them and brought 21 back into the fold, thereby reducing the number of ‘lost sheep’ to 34. I fear, however, that I will not succeed in tracing the e-mail addresses of the odd-thirty remaining. But I expect that this group will dwindle by itself in the next few years. For as soon as annual dues are collected systematically in all AASR regions, these members will either pay their membership fee and thereby get in closer touch with the AASR, hopefully by e-mail. In which case, they will be registered online also. If, however, they do not pay their annual membership dues for two years, they will be removed from the AASR Register of Members according to the rule instituted in 2005 that members who fail to pay their annual dues for two years are to be deleted from the AASR Register of Members, to be removed from the AASR Bulletin distribution lists, as will their access permissions to the Members-Only area of the AASR website.⁷

Other reasons for the expansion of the number of documents are to be found in the nature of the two parts that currently constitute the AASR website.

⁴ They are 29 members in East Africa (Kenya: 27; Uganda: 1; Tanzania: 1); 34 in Southern Africa (South Africa: 13; Zimbabwe: 8; Zambia: 7; Botswana: 5; Namibia: 1); 63 in West Africa (Nigeria: 41; Ghana: 22); 42 in Europe (UK: 15; The Netherlands: 12; Germany: 9; Sweden: 3; Denmark: 1; Norway: 1; Belgium: 1); 33 in North America (all in USA); and 3 in other parts of the world (Israel: 1; Japan: 1; Morocco: 1).

⁵ They are 11 in East Africa (Kenya: 8; Uganda: 3); 10 in Southern Africa (South Africa: 4; Zimbabwe: 2; Zambia: 2; Namibia: 1; Mozambique: 1); 8 in West Africa (Nigeria: 7; Ghana: 1); and 4 in North America (I have their e-mail addresses, but they do not respond).

⁶ AASR Bulletin 24 (November 2005): 6-8

⁷ See AASR Bulletin 23 (May 2005) 16-17

One is the public part.⁸ It contains documents on the AASR: the numbers of its members, meetings and media;⁹ its aims,¹⁰ constitution,¹¹ and current executive;¹² its membership form¹³ and membership dues;¹⁴ and its history¹⁵ and publications.¹⁶

Another document in it contains the list of the thirty-odd AASR members who have a personal webpage. Apart from detailing their mail and e-mail addresses, their phone- and fax numbers, it provides the URL (internet link) to their personal or institutional webpage(s).¹⁷

Again another is 'Persons & Posts'. It contains links to a number of other pages with information on the career or lives of AASR members, such as promotions to professorship, or retirement, or obituaries.¹⁸

Again another lists links to pages with News Items, such as book and journal launches, endowed lectures, theses awards, new centers and societies for the study of religions, etc.¹⁹

An important folder is Weblinks.²⁰ It provides links to growing number of other internet sites that are of interest to AASR members as scholars of (African) religions.

Lastly there is a folder on the IAH with pages on the IAHR congress in Toronto in 2010; pages to IAHR Newsletters; and links to the internet sites of the IAHR itself and its those 20 IAHR affiliates that have a website.²¹

⁸ <http://www.a-asr.org/index.php?id=33> . Its opening page is the Welcome to the AASR page.

⁹ <http://www.a-asr.org/index.php?id=1>

¹⁰ <http://www.a-asr.org/index.php?id=16>

¹¹ <http://www.a-asr.org/index.php?id=17>

¹² <http://www.a-asr.org/index.php?id=25>

¹³ <http://www.a-asr.org/index.php?id=21>

¹⁴ <http://www.a-asr.org/index.php?id=202>

¹⁵ <http://www.a-asr.org/index.php?id=20>

¹⁶ <http://www.a-asr.org/index.php?id=14>

¹⁷ <http://www.a-asr.org/index.php?id=142>. The AASR website can also provide AASR members who do not have a personal webpage with one, as you may see from mine:

<http://www.a-asr.org/index.php?id=162>. Members who would like to have their personal webpage installed on the AASR website may contact me.

¹⁸ <http://www.a-asr.org/index.php?id=189>

¹⁹ <http://www.a-asr.org/index.php?id=8>

²⁰ <http://www.a-asr.org/index.php?id=18>

²¹ <http://www.a-asr.org/index.php?id=139>

The other main section is the Members-Only area.²² In addition to the online AASR Register of Members, discussed above, it has a page with links to AASR Bulletins 21 to 27/28 and to AASR Newsletters 13 to 19, i.e. to all AASR Newsletters and Bulletins of which I have a digital copy.²³ All future AASR Bulletins will be added to this list as soon as the printed ones have been mailed to the members. AASR Newsletters 1 to 12 will be scanned, digitalized and added to this list in due time. Until recently, AASR Bulletins/Newsletters were posted on the website as a collection of HTML documents, often as many as thirty for one AASR Bulletin. They are now posted on it, however, as one PDF (portable document format) for an entire bulletin or newsletter.

Another important collection of links to documents in the Members-Only area is listed on the page Calls for Papers & Participation in Conferences and Projects.²⁴ It lists conferences, in which AASR members may present papers, or just participate, book projects to which they may contribute chapters, and research projects in which they may participate.

Then there is the page Requests. IT lists appeals for help, for reviews, or for nominations.²⁵ Another page is Research Projects & Workgroups,²⁶ which invites members to participate in e.g. research on 'Nollywood', the Nigerian video industry, or on Religion and the Public Moral Debate. The page Vacancies lists links to job offers in Religious Studies and adjacent disciplines and professions.²⁷ The page Scholarships, Fellowship, Research Grants and Theses Awards²⁸ lists invitations to apply for them to those young scholars who qualify for them. The page E-Publications contains a list of links to a growing number of publications that have either been stored in the AASR website or that may be accessed electronically in other websites.²⁹ It should become a center piece of the website in the years ahead. Lastly, there is the page Forums. I will discuss that separately below.

²² <http://www.a-asr.org/index.php?id=171> . It is the Welcome to the AASR Member page.

²³ <http://www.a-asr.org/index.php?id=238>

²⁴ <http://www.a-asr.org/index.php?id=188>

²⁵ <http://www.a-asr.org/index.php?id=190>

²⁶ <http://www.a-asr.org/index.php?id=231>

²⁷ <http://www.a-asr.org/index.php?id=191>

²⁸ <http://www.a-asr.org/index.php?id=199>

²⁹ <http://www.a-asr.org/index.php?id=53>

As this brief inventory of the current state of the AASR website shows, it is growing fast. However, it is by far not yet full-grown. Its CMS (content management system) can handle many more documents than the odd-500 that it contains now. The website's content needs to be expanded in particular into two directions: with webpages with links to internet sites of interest to scholars of (African) religions that make accessible to AASR members the abundant wealth of data on the internet about religions and the study of religions. And an electronic archive needs to be added for publications, electronic and in .pdf, from journals and books, stocked by the CMS of the AASR website in its Members-Only area, and accessible there to AASR members only.

Assistant Webmaster

The management of this quickly expanding site could therefore hardly be done any longer by one Webmaster alone. It is, therefore, most gratifying to report that an Assistant Webmaster has been found, and has been appointed, and is currently being trained. He is Victor Ifeanyi Ezigbo, a former PhD student in Contextual Theology at the School of Divinity at Edinburgh University who is now a Lecturer at Bethel University in St. Paul, Minnesota, USA. He is currently mastering the basic skills of a Manager of the MODx Content Management, the 'open source' software on which the AASR website is run.

AASR-Members-Only Forums

The third major element of the AASR internet site: the Forums³⁰ has briefly been operational, mid-April to 1st July 2008. It has been closed down, perhaps for the time being only, perhaps permanently, for two reasons. One is that AASR members did not seem to have a use for it, for no member attempted to make use of them. The other was a technical reason. When the website was transferred to current commercial host, certain technical problems occurred that made it difficult to get the Forums operational again. As no interest had been shown in them by AASR members, it was decided to leave them non-operational for the time being, and perhaps for good.

³⁰ Visit <http://www.a-asr.org/Forum/index.php>

AASR e-mail system

In my first progress report,³¹ I announced that an AASR e-mail system had been attached to the AASR website for communication between the members of the AASR Executive, and between AASR members and AASR officers, about AASR matters such as AASR membership dues, and AASR events such as AASR conferences. They would enable AASR officers to keep e-mail traffic about the AASR and about AASR events separate from communications pertaining to their other academic and personal affairs.

These e-mail accounts were of two kinds: (1) fourteen@a-asr.org e-mail accounts attached to offices in the AASR Executive; and (2) one for the organization of the Third AASR Conference in Africa held in Gaborone in July 2007. The latter served its purpose well, as did, and do, five of those attached to an AASR office: WebMaster@a-asr.org, Co-Editor@a-asr.org, InternetOfficer@a-asr.org; Gen-Secr@a-asr.org, and RepresNA@a-asr.org. The other nine never became operational, mainly for two reasons. One is that, though a detailed manual was provided to members of the AASR Executive on how to install an ...@a-asr.org account on their computers, it seems that such a task was perceived by most as too daunting and too difficult for them to execute. Or they had no access to ICT-personnel who were able and willing to do it for them. The other reason was that most members of the AASR Executive preferred to receive communications about the AASR on their institutional or private e-mail accounts and shift them after reception.

As most officers of the AASR Executive seem to prefer to do without a separate AASR e-mail system, it has been decided to discontinue it. AASR members have been notified by an e-mail message about the date at which the four accounts that were still operational – those of the AASR General Secretary, of the AASR Representative for North America, of the AASR WebMaster, and of the AASR Internet Officer – have ceased to function.

Personal web pages

A personal web page is a very helpful additional instrument for divulging academic information about oneself. Most websites of universities in Europe, North America and South Africa offer this facility to their members of staff, as you may see on the

³¹ AASR Bulletin 25 (May 2006): 13-16

Web pages of AASR members page.³² Forty-eight AASR members have a personal web page, virtually all in the website of their university in Europe, Israel, North America and Japan. Some two hundred AASR members, in particular in Africa, do not have one. Neither had I, having retired from Leiden University in 2000. I have, however, installed my personal web page on the AASR website.³³ AASR members may likewise have their personal web page installed on the AASR website. Those who wish to have one may contact me.

Electronic archive

The AASR website has great potentiality for being developed into an expansive electronic archive, in particular of publications by AASR members, of e-publications, and by linking to other publications in the field of the academic study of religions on the internet that are of interest to students of the religions of Africa. It may, therefore, be developed into an instrument that makes a great amount of recent literature accessible to scholars in African universities which is not accessible to them in print because of the astronomical amounts that must be paid in nations with so called 'weak currencies' for books and journals published in 'the West'. The AASR website contains numerous bibliographic references to recent literature. If an electronic version of its full text is available, it may be attached to it as a .pdf without any problem in terms of the amount of data that can be stored in the CMS (content management system) of the website, and in terms of the copy right of publishers, because the electronic text will be made available to AASR members only, and in electronic form only.

Site statistics

The Site Statistics page³⁴ has failed to function for some unknown reason since July 2007. It detailed the total number of visitors to the website, as well as the number of page impressions, from 2005 to date, as well as those of the current month. This page is not of great importance to the AASR, for the AASR website is meant primarily for the AASR community itself. Even so, I hope that its function will be restored again.

³² <http://www.a-asr.org/index.php?id=142>

³³ <http://www.a-asr.org/index.ph>

³⁴ <http://www.a-asr.org/index.php?id=3p?id=162>

Transfer of the website to another server

It was understood from the outset that the website, after a period of development, would have to be transferred from the server of my son Radboud to either a commercial server, or to the server of a university. Certain technical server troubles in October/November 2007 made it imperative that this transfer was effected as soon as possible. As hosting on a commercial server seemed beyond the financial means of the AASR, an e-mail was sent in November 2007 to a number of AASR senior members requesting that they explore whether, and if so, at what terms, their university might be willing to host the AASR website on its server (and assure the technical maintenance of the website). Two universities volunteered to host the AASR website for free: Radboud University at Nijmegen, The Netherlands; and the University of Cape Town (UCT), South Africa. I am most grateful to Prof. Frans Wijzen and Prof. Abdulkader Tayob to have negotiated this generous offer of their universities. As UCT digital facilities easily match those of universities in Europe and AASR should 'Africanize' whenever and wherever it can, I decided, after consultation with Prof. Wijzen, to accept the offer of UCT.

However, when Prof. Tayob initiated processes at UCT that were meant to result in the transfer of AASR website to the UTC servers, it became apparent that the ICT department was not able, or not willing, to accommodate the AASR website as it had been developed by the use of open source software by my son Radboud and Martijn Elzinga. Transfer to UCT would mean rebuilding the AASR website with UCT software. Meanwhile, however, a way had been found by Martijn Elzinga to host the AASR website commercially at costs that are quite affordable for the AASR. It has therefore decided to discontinue the transfer of the AASR website to the servers of UCT or any other university and to have it hosted on this particular commercial server.

Vote of thanks

The AASR website, and its Forum facility, were constructed in July 2005 by two ICT professionals, Martijn Elzinga and Radboud Platvoet, at a greatly reduced fee for the AASR. An ...@a-asr.org system of e-mail accounts for the AASR executive and for special AASR needs, such as AASR conferences, publication projects, research projects, etc., was added to it for free by Radboud. The website and the ...@a-asr.org e-mail system were hosted on a server owned by Radboud for the past three years for free, and was maintained by Martijn and Radboud, also for free.

The@a-asr.org e-mail system has been discontinued, as has its Forums facility. The website is hosted commercially, but at little cost to the AASR. Martijn and Radboud will continue to take care of its technical maintenance. AASR owes them a great vote of thanks for this splendid modern communication tool, for all the time and hard work they have put into it, and for ensuring that the website remains at the service of the AASR in the years ahead in a way that is both efficient and affordable.