

Address Presented by Elias Kifon Bongmba, President of the African Association for the Study of Religion on the Occasion of the Installation of the New Leadership of the AASR, September 7, 2020

Dr. Damaris Partisau, president-elect of the African Association for the Study of Religion,
Members of the Executive
Regional Coordinators and Chairs
Elders of the AASR
Colleagues,

We meet at a difficult time because of Covid-19 but your dedication to our work cannot be ignored. We have lost so many to this pandemic and the livelihood of many has been devastated. Our prayers and active collaboration as we all combat this pandemic.

A little over ten years ago, you elected me to serve as President of the African Association of the Study of Religion at the XX Quinquennial Congress of the International Association of the History of Religions (IAHR) that was held in Toronto, Canada in 2010. I still regret that due to bad weather I was not able to travel from Houston to join you for that Congress. In 2015, you reelected the executive and I again to a second term at the XXI IAHR Congress at Erfurt Germany. Today, as we begin a new journey with the election of our first female President, Dr. Damaris Partisau, I want to thank all of you for the support you have given to the executive and me. I extend warm congratulations to my dear friend, Dr. Partisau, who has served as Vice President during the last five years and call on all of you to give her the support and spirit of collaboration which you gave me during the previous ten years. Dr Partisau is a brilliant scholar of religion, gender studies, and contemporary African Christianity, an activist who continues to champion women and rural development in Kenya. I have learned from her wise counsel.

I extend my thanks to Professors Afe Adogame, Ezra Chitando, Corey Williams, Abel Ugba, who have all served on the executive during this time. Professor Oyeronke Olademo and Lovemore Togarasei took over as editors of the Bulletin from the long time inimitable editor, Professor Jan Platvoet whose encyclopedic mind enriched the history of the association offered an up to date record of your research around the world. Professor J. Kwabena Asamoah Gydu has served as our publication officer during the period. I have consulted on a regular some of the elders of the association, including Professors Rosalind Hackett, Platvoet, Professor Gerie ter Haar, Professor Abdulkader Tayob, Professor Afe Adogame, Professor Adraain van Klinken, Dr. Corey Williams, Professor Ezra Chitando, Professor Melissa Browning, Professor Okupona, Professor Mika Vaihakangas, Professor Jesse Mugambi, Professor Rosemary Amenga-Atego, Professor Njoki Wane, Professor Ernst Conradie, Professor Tinyiko Maluleke, Professor James Amanze, Dr. Marja Hinfellaar. Dr. Hermen Kroesbergen, Johanneke Kroesbergen. Dr. Chammah Kaunda, Dr. Nathanael Homewood, Professors Lilian Dube, Dr. Althea Spencer-Miller served as North American Representatives during the first part of my tenure and today Professor Esther Acolatse, and Tim Hartman serve as the North American representatives and worked with me during the years to put together our panels for the American Academy of Religion and the Society for Biblical Literature. Our web gurus over the years have included Professor Jan Platvoet, Mr. Wes Browning, Dr. Sarah Fretheim, and joined this year by Rudolf Gaisie.

During my tenure, our Regional Representatives have served us well. These colleagues include Professor Sussy Gumo and Dr. Damaris Partisau for East Africa, Davie O. Ogungbile, West Africa; Frans Wijzen, Europe; Lilian Dube Dr. Althea Spencer-Miller and Esther Acolatse, North America; Mohamed Haron, Botswana, Rose Mary Amenga-Etog, Ghana, Loreen Maseno, Kenya, Danoye Oguntola-Laguda, Nigeria, (West/South/East); Oyeronke Olademo (Middle Belt and North); Thomas Joseph Ndaluka, Tanzania; Marja Infelaar, Zambia, Tabona Shoko, Zimbabwe. I want to thank all the colleagues in my department who have been very supportive and taken over many responsibilities I should have done in the department. I thank the leadership of Rice University, especially Dean Nicholas Shumway and Dean Kathleen Canning of the School of Humanities for supporting my travels for the AASR during the last ten years. It has been an enormous investment in our work as an association and I deeply appreciate that support,

Academic Association Affiliation

Our parent organization is The International Association of the History of Religion (IAHR).

We have affiliations with the following academic association:

American Academy of Religion, (AAR)

Society for Biblical Literature (SBL)

African Studies Association (ASA)

The Joint Societies Conference of South Africa,

As a Related Scholarly Organization of both the AAR and SBO, the AASR organizes and hosts panel presentations during the is linked to AAR as a Related Scholarly Organization and hosts panels and presented each year at the annual AAR meeting. One of the first initiatives I took when I became president was to initiates consultations with the African Studies Association, and we were approved as an affiliate organization and have organized panels at the annual meetings of the ASA Studies Association

Academic Collaborations

Journal of Africana Religions (JOAR), (edited by Edward E. Curtis IV (Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis) and Sylvester A. Johnson (Virginia Tech University), “An interdisciplinary journal encompassing history, anthropology, Africana studies, gender studies, ethnic studies, religious studies, and other allied disciplines, the *Journal of Africana Religions* embraces a variety of humanistic and social scientific methodologies in understanding the social, political, and cultural meanings and functions of Africana religions. . . including the relationship between religion and empire, slavery, racism, modern industrial capitalism, and globalization.”¹

Leadership and Steering Committee for AAR/SBL Panels

Co-Chair: Professor Esther Acolatse, *Duke University*, Professor Althea Spencer Miller, *Drew University*, and Professor Timothy Longman. During the AAR/SBL meeting in Atlanta, GA, USA on November 22 2015, AASR members selected the following to serve as the steering committee for the annual meetings of the AAR/SBL

¹ See *Journal of African Religions*

Nathanael Homewood, *DePauw University*
Elana Jefferson-Tatum, *Emory University*
Stephen Lloyd, *Boston University*
Lovemore Togarasei, *University of Botswana*

Academic Presentations at the AAR/SBL

I was elected in 2010, and I do not have any records of our participation at the AAR/SBL meetings that year. I have records from the Annual Meeting of 2011.

2012 San Francisco, **5** presentations;

2012 in Chicago **22** (there were several speakers on three book discussions, the monumental text on Religion and HIV AIDS edited by Beverley Haddad, African Traditions in the Study of Religion, edited by Afe Adogame, Ezra Chitando, Bataye in honor of Jacob Olupona, and the monumental text on African Sexuality by Sylvia Tamale),

2013 Baltimore **6** presentations,

2014 San Diego **12** presentations which included 2 Round Tables honoring Professor Jesse Mugambi.

2015 in Atlanta **16** presentations.

2016 in San Antonio **17** presentations,

2017 in Boston, **14** presentations,

2018 Denver **15** presentations,

2019 in San Diego, **10** presentations

AASR Conferences

During my term, we have successfully organized 4 AASR Conferences in Africa. It was my privilege to help set up the local arrangements committee who worked the AASR Conference committee and executive to put together these conferences. I want to thank several people who I called on to lead the local arrangement committee, Professor Abdulkader Tayob of the University of Cape Town, Professor Rosemary Amenga-Etego of the University of Ghana, and Professor Marja Hinfellar and Judith Ziwa of the University of Zambia, and Dr. Chamamah Kaunda, now of Yonsei University in South Korea.

When I came to the office, the AASR had already asked Dr. Damaris Partisau of Egerton University to head the local arrangements committee. I visited the venues for conferences to meet with colleagues on the ground. Some of these meetings, for example, Lusaka, Cape Town, and Accra, were planned to accommodate other engagements. The Kenya visit was planned explicitly as a rescue mission for the conference. During that visit, several Kenyan colleagues, led by Professor Mugambi met with at the University of Nairobi and offered constructive ideas. Central to that meeting was the decision to invite Professor John Samuel Mbiti, to grace us with his presence and deliver the keynote address. We are all indebted to Professor Jesse Mugambi, who used his own resources and made it possible for Professor Mbiti to attend the conference and deliver the Keynote lecture. I am also thankful to Dr. Damaris and her beautiful children who hosted me in Nakuru during the visit to consult with University officials and our Kenyan colleagues.

Njoro, Kenya, Egerton University, (Sports, Leisure, Religion & Spirituality in Africa & the African Diaspora) – July 18-23, 2012 **59** presentations

We adopted a statement on violence in Africa

- Cape Town, South Africa, University of Cape Town (Religion, Ecology, and the Environment in Africa and the African Diaspora) – July 30-August 3, 2014 **68** presentations

- Legon, Accra, Ghana, University of Ghana (Religion, Sexuality, and Identity in Africa and the African Diaspora) – 26-29 July 2016 **111** presentations

- Lusaka, Zambia, University of Zambia and Justo Mwale University (Revisiting Religion, Politics, and the State in Africa and the African Diaspora) – 1-4 August 2018 **79** presentations

IAHR Executive Committee

As part of my duties, I have represented the AASR at three executive committee meetings. First, at the British Association for the Study of Religion Conference at Liverpool in 2014. I thank Sara Fretheim for facilitating that visit to the committee meeting. I joined all of you at the IAHR Congress at Erfurt, Germany, in 2015, where I also attended the IAHR Executive Committee as your representative. In 2019 I attended the Executive Committee meeting at Delphi, in Athens. The Delphi meetings raised many questions, all centered on the lingering debates about the scientific study of religion in the AASR and IAHR. I responded to the criticism that we have allowed theologians to attend our conferences. I pointed out that the conference committee reviewed those proposals for all papers which our colleagues have presented at the conferences. Submissions with theological content that brought a multidisciplinary approach to themes like gender, health, politics, and social development were generally accepted as long as there were not advocating a strictly theological approach to the study of religion. I have shared the substance of those discussions informally with members of the executive.

Nevertheless, for this brief report, I must underscore that no one has ever considered altering the mission of the AASR as an association that promotes the academic with a social scientific approach. I should add that during the last ten years, I have not attempted to persuade anyone in the executive or the association to engage in advocacy of theological approach to the work of the association. In due course, I will reflect on this question as the need arises. Despite these lingering differences, and what I considered a contentious debate which was sometimes personalized, I must say that the IAHR president Tim Jensen and the Secretary-General Professor Satoko were very supportive. They made me feel at home and welcomed.

I express thanks to the IAHR leadership for providing substantial support for us to run our conferences. We have been able to run those conferences successfully because of the subventions from the IAHR.

Publications

We launched an *E-Journal*, thanks to the conscientious work of Professor Afe Adogame and the editorial team that made this new venture possible. It is a peer-reviewed journal, and we encourage our members to submit papers for consideration. In addition to setting up this journal, Adogame has promoted research and publications in the AASR. We are better researchers today because of his work.

EJournal <https://www.a-asr.org/journal/guidelines-for-authors/>

Public Statements

The nature of our association has given us pause for making public statements. However, we have made two public statements. The first statement was issued after the conference at Egerton University, calling on the nations of Africa to work to stop the violence that was destroying the African continent. We recently issued a statement after a police officer killed Mr. George Floyd while his colleagues stood by and watched him kneel on the neck of Mr. Floyd for 8 minutes 46 seconds. We condemned police brutality, racism, and expressed our support for Black Lives Matter and also pledged to do research that will promote the respect of human dignity and eliminate racism.

Challenges

First, The *Bulletin* has not been published in two years. We are confident that the new executive will work to revitalize it because it a vital source for short articles, news about the association, and the important updates about the research our colleagues continue to do around the world. Our editors have not received any submissions. All of us must submit news about our research, institutions, and shorter critical reflection or early reports on on-going research.

Second, our biggest challenge remains finances. We inherited a problem which broadly defined is this; many of our colleagues who teach in Western Universities do not pay membership dues. Our colleagues who teach in African universities tell us the rates are high even when they are pro-rated. None of our colleagues in both the Western academies and Africa go hungry and can certainly afford to pay membership dues. The question I have not been able to answer is, why do we not do what we should do? These are tough things to say, but we must think about these things. The reason I have been fortunate to travel on behalf of the association is that Rice University, where I teach, has generously supported those travels and conference costs. I worry that we may not sustain our work if we do not face this and do what we should do. What are the benefits? The AASR provides all of us an opportunity to attend meetings of the IAHR, AAR, SBL, ASA, and every two years a conference in Africa. We must emphasize that our membership dues and additional contributions can take us to a point where we can do a lot more research or offer specialized lectureships in collaboration with the universities in Africa.

I wish to express appreciation to the executive for facilitating a smooth transition and welcome and thank our new leaders and pledge to work with them as they expand the work of AASR. I look forward to seeing many of you at AASR Conferences and panels at the African Studies Association, the American Academy of Religion, and The Society for Biblical Literature. I call on all of you to give all our support to Dr. Damaris Partisau and the new executive as they lead us into the future.

Thank you.

Elias Kifon Bongmba
Outgoing President
September 7, 2020

