New Testament and Early Christian Studies at the University of South Africa: Webinar

Friday 4 March

Manufacturing Religion: From Christian Origins to Classical Islam.

In Discussion with Recent Works by Willi Braun, Robyn Faith Walsh, and Ahmed El Shamsy.

Friday 4 March

* Pretoria UTC+2 16:00
* Edmonton, AB UTC-7 07:00
* Miami, FL UTC-5 09:00

Topic: Manufacturing Religion: From Christian Origins to Classical Islam.

Time: Mar 4, 2022 04:00 PM Harare, Pretoria

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Manufacturing Religion: From Christian Origins to Classical Islam.

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“Religion” as concept, as collective noun for sets of discourses and practices, and as “object” of study, has, in recent years, been retheorised and redescribed as a discursive formation. Within the context of an anthropocentric study of religion, the concept “discourse,” together with the phrase “religion as a *social* discourse,” does not just indicate that “discourse” (as even in the sense of religious discourse) is a collective noun for the contents of sets of significations that construct our way of knowing the world, it also includes the social location/s that form/s the originary matrix for the particular invention of these sets of significations; and it includes the social interests encompassed by or encapsulated in, and giving rise to, these sets of significations. This way of knowing-through-acts-of-signification is not just individual but is socially conditioned, that is, it is institutionalised in canons of tradition, schools of thought, habitus as habituated action, social formations, cultural and socio-political-economic conventions, that is, as discursive formations.

“Discourses are practices ‘that systematically organize and regulate statements about a certain theme; by doing so, discourses determine the conditions of possibility of what (in a social group at a certain period of time) can be thought and said’ (Eder 2006). Hence, discourse analysis does not only look at the textual and linguistic dimension of a topic but also at the practices that carry or change orders of knowledge. This includes institutions such as governments, courts, scientific associations, religious organizations, the media, as well as universities. These practices determine ‘the conditions of possibility of what can be thought and said’ from identifiable positions of power. That is why discourse research always pays attention not only to an analysis of what is being said or done, but also of who says or does it, and from which position and institutional background this is said or done” (Jay Johnston and Kocku von Stuckrad, *Discourse Research and Religion*, 3).

The study of “discourse” is, in this understanding, a way into investigating all the *concrete operational sites of a given historical society’s sense of self – its self-understandings, its self-representations, and its self-reinscriptions, the way in which these manifest in social and political institutions, public texts and literary traditions … at all levels and stages of history*.

These questions of discourse run as a golden thread through Willi Braun’s *Jesus and Addiction to Origins. Towards an Anthropocentric Study of Religion,* Robyn Faith Walsh’s *The Origins of Early Christian Literature: Contextualizing the New Testament within Greco-Roman Literary Culture*, and Ahmed El Shamsy’s *Rediscovering the Islamic Classics: How Editors and Print Culture Transformed an Intellectual Tradition*.

The authors discussed in this webinar have all three in their various ways explored the formation of religious discourses (whether early Christian or Islamic), and the formation and institutionalisation of scholarly discourses both in Late Antiquity and in more recent centuries, thereby laying bare how religions and the study of religions are invented traditions and invented, mythographic histories. This webinar is an opportunity to draw the conversations elicited by these works into our research and teaching as resources for imagining scholarship differently, and for thinking with to the enrichment of scholarship, and for the promotion of inter-field and interdisciplinary/trans-disciplinary work on religion.

Programme …>

PROGRAMME

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|  | Welcoming and introduction | 16:00 – 16:05 |
| Willi Braun, *Jesus and Addiction to Origins. Towards an Anthropocentric Study of Religion* (Sheffield; Bristol, CT: Equinox, 2020) |
| Pieter J.J. Botha, Unisa |  | 16:05 – 16:30 |
| Gerhard van den Heever, Unisa | Manufacturing Religion in the Anthropocene: Discourse, Religion, and Christian Origins | 16:30 – 16:55 |
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| Robyn Faith Walsh, *The Origins of Early Christian Literature: Contextualizing the New Testament within Greco-Roman Literary Culture* (Cambridge; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2021) |
| Chris L. de Wet, Unisa |  | 17:00 – 17:25 |
| Jeremiah Coogan, Oxford | Reading Communities without Romantic Origins | 17:25 – 17:50 |
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| Ahmed El Shamsy, *Rediscovering the Islamic Classics: How Editors and Print Culture Transformed an Intellectual Tradition* (Princeton, NJ; Woodstock: Princeton University Press, 2020) |
| Auwais Rafudeen, Unisa |  | 17:55 – 18:20 |
|  |  |  |
| Responses and discussion |
| Willi Braun | Responding | 18:25 – 18:50 |
| Robyn Faith Walsh | Responding | 18:50 – 19:15 |
| Open discussion  |  | 19:15 – 20:00 |
|  | Closing remarks |  |

About the authors:

Willi Braun

Willi Braun is Professor Emeritus in the Department of History and Classics and the Program in Religious Studies at the University of Alberta, Edmonton. Previously he served as President of the North American Association for the Study of Religion and the Canadian Society of Biblical Studies. A long-standing member of the Society of Biblical Literature Ancient Myths and Modern Theories of Christian Origins Seminar, he richly contributed to the establishment of redescriptive theorising of Christian origins as an important focus in our disciplinary field, and published widely on matters relating to both the study of religion as well as on Christian origins. Together with Russell T. McCutcheon he edited the ground-breaking volume, *Guide to the Study of Religion* (London: Cassell, 2000), one of the most important new works on re-envisioning the study and theory of religion at the start of the new millennium. Again, with Russell T. McCutcheon, he edited *Introducing Religion: Essays in Honor of Jonathan Z. Smith* (London: Equinox, 2007), paying homage to the impact of Jonathan Z. Smith on revisioning the study of religion.

Robyn Faith Walsh

Robyn Faith Walsh is an Associate Professor at the University of Miami. She earned her Ph.D. at Brown University in Religions of the Ancient Mediterranean, with a focus on early Christianity, ancient Judaism and Roman archaeology. Before coming to UM, Professor Walsh taught at Wheaton College (Mass.), The College of the Holy Cross, and received teaching certificates and pedagogical training at Brown University and Harvard University. She teaches courses on the New Testament, Greco-Roman literature and material culture. Research interests include the letters of Paul, the history and interpretation of the Synoptic problem, theory and method, cognitive science, Imperial archaeology, and the influence of German Romanticism on the field of early Christian studies. Her first monograph, *The Origins of Early Christian Literature: Contextualizing the New Testament within Greco-Roman Literary Culture*, was recently published with Cambridge University Press.

Ahmed El Shamsy

Ahmed El Shamsy studied in London and Egypt before graduating with an MA and PhD from Harvard University. Ahmed El Shamsy is currently tenured Associate Professor at the University of Chicago, Division of Humanities – Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations. He studies the intellectual history of Islam, focusing on the evolution of the classical Islamic disciplines and scholarly culture within their broader historical context. His research addresses themes such as orality and literacy, the history of the book, and the theory and practice of Islamic law. El Shamsy’s first book, *The Canonization of Islamic Law: A Social and Intellectual History*, traces the transformation of Islamic law from a primarily oral tradition to a systematic written discipline in the eighth and ninth centuries. In his second book, *Rediscovering the Islamic Classics: How Editors and Print Culture Transformed an Intellectual Tradition*, he shows how Arab editors and intellectuals in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries used the newly adopted medium of printing to rescue classical Arabic texts from oblivion and to popularize them as the classics of Islamic thought. Other recent research projects investigate the interplay of Islam with other religious and philosophical traditions, for example by exploring the influence of the Greek sage Galen on Islamic thought and the construction of a distinct self-identity among early Muslims.