

## AASR 2014

### Abstracts of Special Panels

#### Arranged Alphabetically by Convenors

**Adogame, Afe** (The University of Edinburgh, A.Adogame@ed.ac.uk)

#### **Publish or Perish? The Politics of Academic/Scholarly Publishing; Grant Writing and Job Market Realities**

This panel is put together specially for doctoral students, post-doctoral fellows, early career faculty members in Religious Studies or related disciplines of humanities, theology, and the social sciences. The panel will focus on academic/scholarly publishing, grant writing and job market realities for **prospective** and recent graduates and early career professionals. The urgency and import of academic/scholarly publishing and grant writing has become more and more expedient in an era of global commodification of the academia, dwindling budget cuts and funding for higher citadels of learning, and against the backdrop of an increasingly competitive job market. More than before, publishing has assumed a crucial part of attaining full/part time employment in the academy. The decision and process of publishing a thesis/dissertation, a monograph, a book chapter, an article in a peer-review journal, a review essay, a book review, or even an abstract proposal requires a good knowledge of the academic publishing culture(s).

First, this session will focus on academic publishing culture(s) and provide tips on how to get published locally and internationally; introduce several different publication venues where graduate students and early career scholars might publish their work; discuss opportunities and challenges for publishing, along with some of the logistical details. Second, it will focus on grant-writing as an inextricable aspect of academic life, whether at the graduate, postgraduate or faculty level. This panel will discuss the various types of grants (pre-dissertation, dissertation research, dissertation writing) and granting agencies (private, institutional); and then examine in depth the key components of a successful proposal; and address grant-writing in different local/global contexts. Third, in an increasingly competitive era, what is the status of the job market, within and outside of the academy, for those holding or pursuing graduate degrees in religious studies and theology, arts and humanities-related fields? In order to encourage graduate/postgraduate students and early career researchers to realistically diagnose and strategically respond to a difficult academic market, this panel will assess the current state of the job market; explore strategies for successfully navigating the stark realities and how to pursue opportunities both within and outside academia toward the end of vocationally fulfilling employment.

**Adogame, Afe** (The University of Edinburgh, A.Adogame@ed.ac.uk)

#### **Research Methods in & Research Methodology for the Study of Religion**

This panel is put together specially for doctoral students, post-doctoral fellows, early career faculty members in Religious Studies or related disciplines. The session will highlight the significance of research methods and research methodologies in the study of religion. Many theses and dissertations are undertaken by research students with rather confused understanding or little serious examination of the methodological principles that justify the research methods they have used. This may obscure the reasons why certain methods were employed or why the research questions were framed. How do we untangle the

nexus between methods and methodology in order to make methodological preconceptions more explicit and more open to critical reflection?

The academic study of the phenomenon of religion has largely developed as a social scientific category. How we conceptualise religion has significant implications for how we theorise our work, design our projects and make knowledge-claims. Reflecting on our concepts of religion is a fundamental task for good research in our field. As a deeply interdisciplinary field, Religious studies also require the use of theories and methods drawn from many other fields of study. The interdisciplinary character of religious studies is part of what makes the study of religion so interesting. However, it also makes writing in religious studies very challenging with a wide range of theories, methods and approaches.

The role of empirical research in the study of religion has become increasingly important in recent years. In the discipline of Religious Studies, more graduate students and early career scholars/researchers are undertaking field-work based projects, and in other social science disciplines there has been a renewed interest in religion as an area of study. However, there have been relatively insufficient, inadequate resources available to support methodological training in our field.

The panelists, drawing on their own tremendous research expertise and their extensive experience of teaching research students, will outline a process that will enable graduate students/postdoctoral researchers and early career scholars to develop a more reflective, reflexive and critical approach to their research. Topics to be covered in this session include: thinking of and producing a research proposal; key elements and processes of research design; the politics and ethics of research; using qualitative and quantitative data-sets for research and analysis on religion; ethnographic approaches in theory and practice; developing research interviews, etc. The session will include ample time for questions and discussion. Attendees will have the opportunity to engage in conversations with the panelists, addressing particular issues and interests.

**Brigaglia, Andrea** (University of Cape Town, [andrea.brigaglia@uct.ac.za](mailto:andrea.brigaglia@uct.ac.za))

### **'If all the trees on earth were pens...' (Qur. 31: 27): Intersections between Botanic Knowledge and Writing Practices in West African Islam**

This panel will bring together specialists in the fields of medical anthropology, intellectual history and manuscript studies, providing a space for the discussion of the intersection between botanic knowledge, writing practices and healing practices in the cultures of West African Muslims.

Several studies on the medical anthropology of West Africa have underlined the overlap between religion, herbal knowledge, writing practices and healing practices in the region. This is particularly apparent in the area of the production of 'talismans' based on Qur'anic writing, which used to be a typical activity of the literate class ('ulama'), as well as the 'ulama's main source of revenue after teaching. Less immediately recognizable as influenced by religion, the activities of bone-setters, barbers/surgeons and midwives operating among Muslims in the region, also reflect the influence of notions and ideas that have been circulating for centuries through the medium of Arabic writing, and which in many cases can be traced back to a Greek antecedent.

If writing in Arabic language has been the means to transmit botanic and herbalist knowledge in the history of West Africa, most of the tools that were used in a variety of writing practices in the region were also, conversely, made of local plants. From the different woods used to manufacture writing boards, to the corn-stalks cut into reed pens, to the various plants used to produce inks, to the gourds used as ink-pots, living objects from the vegetal world were (in some cases, are) transformed into utensils for the cultivation of a manuscript culture.

**Chitando, Ezra Chitando** (University of Zimbabwe, chitsa21@yahoo.com)

**van Klinken, Adriaan** (University of Leeds, a.vanklinken@leeds.ac.uk)

### **Public Religion and Issues of Homosexuality in Contemporary Africa**

Issues of homosexuality have recently become subject of public and political debates in various African countries. So far little energy is expended in understanding these controversies in all their complexity and the critical role religion plays in them. The papers in this panel are contributions to a book project that aims to address this gap (to be published in the Ashgate Religion in Modern Africa series). They explore how and why issues related to homosexuality recently have become so central in public and political debates in Africa, examine the trajectories of the ‘politicisation’ of the issue in different countries in relation to both global discourses and politics and local social, cultural and political factors and developments. The papers particularly investigate the role of religion (religious beliefs, worldviews and sensitivities, sacred texts, religious leaders and organisations, faith communities, faith-based activism, etcetera) in these dynamics—a role that may be more ambiguous and multifaceted than often is suggested. The focus on the notion of ‘public religion’ enables an analysis of the conflation of religion with politics and public life that is characteristic of the configuration of religion in contemporary African societies and that is clearly reflected in the debates about homosexuality. Not only does the notion of public religion mean that religion in Africa is highly visible in public and political spheres, but also that it relates in dynamic and complex ways to secular regimes of knowledge, power and politics both nationally and globally—something that is particularly relevant to the contemporary debates about homosexuality in contemporary Africa.

**Davies, Kate** (Southern African Communities Environment Institute, Kate@Safcei.org.za)

### **Stories of eco-justice praxis from Southern Africa**

Our experience is that there has been a lot of theorising about religion and ecology in recent years but there is still a paucity of stories of faith-based community eco-justice action. Stories of experiential and participatory learning in faith communities will help inform best practice as we grow this important community of eco-activists in our world facing an ecological crisis.

**Echtler, Magnus** (Bayreuth University, magnus.echtler@uni-bayreuth.de ) & **Kogelmann, Franz**

(Bayreuth University, franz.kogelmann@uni-bayreuth.de)

### **Wilderness in/as Sacred Space**

Wilderness, the untamed, uncultured space beyond human control, features largely in the construction of sacred space. Sometimes areas identified with spiritual forces or agencies are not used economically, they are excluded from domestication and left undisturbed save for ritualized occasions or as retreats for religious experts. In other contexts wilderness must be overcome in order to establish a sacred place; a wild animal must be killed or a tree felled in order for the temple to be built. Even here the wild, a force beyond the control of humans, remains important for the establishment of sacred places, as their location is indicated by animals or features of the natural environment, i.e. their location is given, and not chosen. Our panel investigates the various roles of the human environment, with its polarity between wilderness and town, the untamed and the domesticated, nature and culture, in the production of sacred space.

In modern times, wilderness itself became a place set apart from human intervention, the wild turned into a natural reserve, visited only on rare and ritualized occasions. With industrialization and the increasing exploitation of natural resources and the destruction of natural environments came the construction of a natural other, a nature beyond human control that transcends human society. And Africa became a favourite location for the implementation of ‘Garden of Eden’ fantasies. Here we explore how conceptualizations of sacred space can be applied to national parks and other manifestations of environmental protection.

**Mukonyora, Isabel** (Western Kentucky University, bella.mukonyora@wku.edu)

### **Nature, Religion, Colonial and Postcolonial Modernity in Africa**

This panel draws attention to religious responses to the broken cultures associated with a colonial modernity now in its postcolonial phase. It is suggested that conquest, industrialization and social changes accelerated by globalization, and bids for freedom, led to religious responses to the destruction of the environment throughout the continent. Since the continent is vast, and there are plural arenas for the practice of religion in Africa, this panel provides members and friends of the ISSRNC with a unique opportunity for a dialogue concerned with nature, religion and changing cultures found on the continent. Environmental problems of Africa cannot be solved without taking into account African religious responses to problems of violence, economic strife and the destruction of the environment.

**Nogueira-Godsey, Elaine** (University of Cape Town, nogueirelaine@gmail.com) &

**Hoël , Nina** (University of Kwazulu-Natal, hoelnina@hotmail.com)

### **Teaching Religion and Ecology: Engaging Teaching Methodologies and Practices for Embodied Learning**

The area of “religion and ecology” is interdisciplinary and multifaceted field of study and thus requires diverse approaches and methods of inquiry. This panel is dedicated to discussing and ‘showcasing’ some of the teaching methodologies and practices employed in the undergraduate course “Religion, Spirituality and Ecology”, taught at the Department of Religious Studies, University of Cape Town. Drawing on examples from Abrahamic religions, the religious traditions of Asia and Africa, as well as contemporary expressions of nature religions and eco-activism, the course aims to offer various perspectives on human-earth relations while also critically engage responsive theologies and spiritualities that challenge dominant discourses of power and hegemony in the postcolonial, postmodern world. In addition to the standard ‘reading packs’, the course curricula also includes, among other things, poetry, documentaries, role plays, and a group project. These diverse teaching resources/strategies are used with the goal of stretching the normative standards of undergraduate modules as well as to provide students with a range of registers through which to reflect on and critically engage the field of religion and ecology. In the first part of this panel, two of the panel participants, who partook in the development and sculpting of this course, offer their insights from teaching some aspects of the course “Religion, Spirituality and Ecology”. In particular, they emphasise pedagogical approaches that may teach students about religion and ecology in ways that not only are intellectually stimulating but also appeals to embodied learning and the cultivation of a sense of community (within the classroom and elsewhere). The second part of this panel is dedicated to discussing and showcasing the group project, which forms an integral component of the course. The group project is an activity that aims to integrate theory with praxis and enable undergraduate students to develop a critical understanding of the role and relevance of the study of religion and ecology for

contemporary society. In addition to addressing the pedagogical motivations that inspired the development of the group project, four former students of the course “Religion, Spirituality and Ecology” present their group projects. Their participation (and presentations) highlights the importance of learning by doing, seeing and experiencing, while also foregrounding the nexus between theory and praxis in a distinct South African context.

**van Heerden, Schalk** (University of South Africa, Vheersw@unisa.ac.za)

### **Ecological readings of ancient texts in African contexts**

The main objective of the panelists is to explore the challenges posed by African realities and contexts to current debates on ecological biblical hermeneutics. Two pioneering projects on ecological hermeneutics have been launched in Australia and the United Kingdom around the turn of the century. Notions such as ecojustice, the interconnectedness and intrinsic worth of all members of the Earth community, the voice and resistance of Earth, the idea of the purpose of the cosmos, Earth and all its components, and the concept of mutual custodianship feature prominently in current eco-hermeneutical discourses. Some also maintain that an ecological biblical hermeneutics should be informed by (the scriptures of) one's religious heritage. The panelists will address the question whether such notions and concepts speak to, and can be informed and enriched by, African sensibilities. After an overview of eco-hermeneutical issues, the panel will focus on matters related to (eco)justice, cosmology and worldview, the scope of salvation, and the question whether ecotheological theories address grassroots realities in Africa. Each paper will explore one of the above issues in dialogue with a particular biblical text.

**van Schalkwyk, Annalet** (University of South Africa, Vscha@unisa.ac.za)

### **Women religious scholars and activists in dialogue on Southern African women's ecological wisdom**

Indigenous knowledge systems of rural African communities, related to ecological care and sustainable living, is largely hidden and unknown to the mainline capitalist and urbanised societies in South(ern) Africa. This is a result of colonialism, Christianisation and westernisation, white land ownership and the modernisation of agriculture. Yet, in many lesser known areas of South(ern) Africa, rural – and sometimes urban - communities are making a reasonably sustainable living from the land and agriculture, also by relying on their indigenous knowledge systems and traditional belief systems. Local women play crucial roles in creating such sustainable livelihoods for their communities.

The question to be explored in this forum session is: How do women theologians, scholars of religion, in dialogue with woman activists and practitioners; encounter African belief systems, indigenous wisdom, earth-keeping practices and gender roles; so as to contribute towards a more deliberate and public praxis of earth-keeping among religious communities of all traditions in South(ern) Africa; with special focus on the contribution of women?

How do Christian theologians in particular engage and dialogue with indigenous people and their belief and knowledge systems, so as to come to know and re-value their ecological wisdom and practices? Is it possible for Christian theologians – and in particular for women theologians – to engage in intercultural and interreligious dialogue with local people and to be informed by them; so as to gain earth-keeping wisdom which can strengthen the earth-keeping role of women in all communities; which can transform religious and societal attitudes and behaviour regarding the ecology; which can influence the academic

and theological discourse on the ecology and earthkeeping; and which can make this knowledge more public and influential in our society?

This forum will create the space for woman scholars and ecological activists to share and reflect on their research and experience in this regard.

**Wepener, Cas** (University of Pretoria, Cas.Wepener@up.ac.za)

### **Religious Ritual and Social Capital Formation in South Africa**

Since 2008 an international team of scholars has been studying worship in the Corinthian Church of South Africa, an independent church in the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal Provinces of South Africa. The aim of the research was to understand social capital formation through the lens of ritual and also to determine if, and how, ritual may generate social capital. This presentation will explain the main outlines of the project and discuss some of the relevant rituals. These include weekly Sunday worship and the annual ritual known as Isitshisa, as well as water rituals and rituals of commensality.