

UPDATES

APRIL 2021



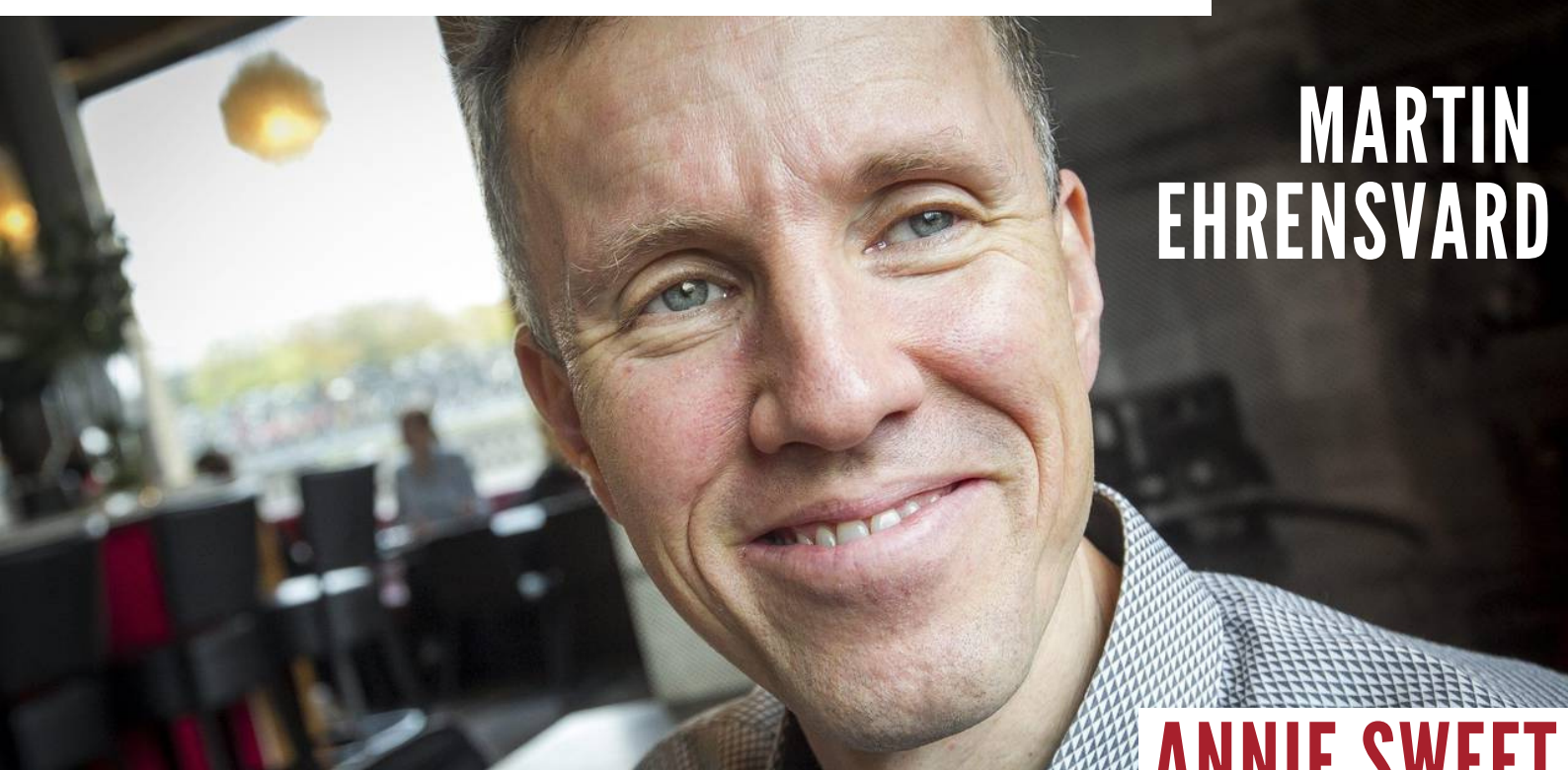
RRE FIRST CYCLER

Nils Hallvard Korsvoll

Magic, the Original RRE
Network & Keeping a Scholarly
Tradition Alive in the Nordics



FROM KENYA TO THE DANUBE



**MARTIN
EHRENSVARD**

An RRE Teacher's Perspective
on Alumni, the Programme &
its Future

Packaging RRE
in the Digital
Advertising
Industry

ANNIE SWEET

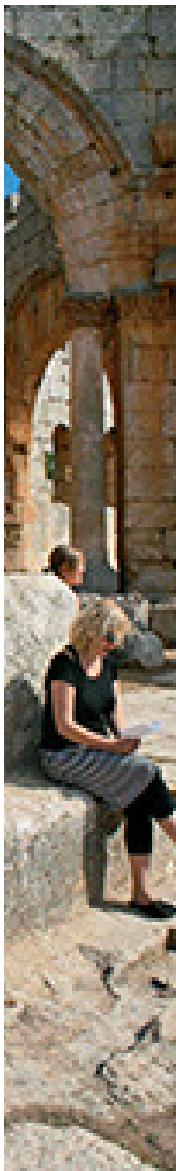


CONTENTS

03 Packaging RRE in the Digital Advertising Industry

04 Magic, The Original RRE Network & Keeping a Scholarly Tradition Alive in the Nordics

05 The Nordic Network for the Study of Judaism, Christianity & Islam: Continuing the Legacy



06 From Kenya to the Danube: an RRE Teacher's Perspective

08 RRE PhD Workshops: The Proposal that Sparked a Conversation & Idea



Packaging RRE in the Digital Advertising Industry

In Conversation with Annie (Hackett) Sweet



Day-to-Day Job

Annie works in the digital advertising industry. In her current role at Ogury, she manages the company's relationships with clients and brands - Uber, Herbal Essences, Proctor & Gamble.

"I like to build teams and see them grow" she beamed. She has led the company's operations across Europe. "My job is about: my clients are happy and my teams are happy." Working with people outside the UK and getting to know their approach to the working world is bread and butter for Annie and the RRE equipped her for exactly this.

Packaging RRE in the Careers World

As I went through her LinkedIn profile, I remarked how craftily she packaged her RRE as MA in Philosophy & Religious Studies. "Are you still a practicing religious person?" - a question once asked at a job interview, to which Annie delightfully clarified: despite never being religious, the course gave her specific insights alongside acquired "people skills" and cultural-sensitive competencies. Success in the careers world is one's ability to harness the 'transitional skills' acquired in the programme to market the degree.

Marketability of the RRE degree

"Hiring people is a big focus of my job because I build teams. In my marketing and advertising team, nearly everyone has a Humanities degree. You can call me biased that I hire people with Humanities degrees because I think they are more likely to be inquisitive, creative, and curious because they're taking a subject which although has been studied time and over, but they are able to reinterpret it in their own way. These people demonstrate 'transitional skills' that make them brilliant for the roles. Humanities degrees like the RRE are therefore an asset - absolutely!"

Advice for current RRE students or recent alumni

"Get the Masters done and the rest will come. If you're a hardworking, dedicated person ... it's not about what the world will offer you. It's about what you can offer the world."

“

Success in the careers world is one's ability to harness the "transitional skills" acquired in the programme to market the degree.

”

How do you sell the RRE programme? You get a leading expert in marketing to package it. What if this expert herself went through the MA and you reminisce RRE days - talking about transvestite monks in tutorials, strolling the streets of Rome and sitting together with colleagues devouring delicious pizza enroute to Pompeii? We flipped the whole thing on its head during our online catch up. From an interest in 1-9th century hagiographies to deciding on a course of study abroad, having to "take money off the food budget" to afford compact seminar expenses, leaving the PhD illusion to work for Channel 4 only to take a leap of faith and work for start-ups across Europe?

The Pull of the Roots Programme

Annie wanted to move away from the UK and the opportunity to travel across the Nordics was attractive. The programme made her realise that her personality "did not suit the solitary seclusion of being an academic" - bye PhD. "I enjoyed talking to other people and working with them; the course gave me everything I wanted in being able to work with different people and disciplines".

Magic, The Original RRE Network & Keeping a Scholarly Tradition Alive in the Nordics

Conversation with Nils Hallvard Korsvoll

It wouldn't be an exaggeration if I summarised Nils' career and RRE journey as something truly magical. Of course, listening to marketing guru Annie Sweet had no influence in my writing this at all. Nils is Associate Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Agder in Kristiansand, Norway. He is the first 'first cyler' to feature here and we kicked off on the topic of Masters' theses.

Research Interests in Magic and Material Cultures

Nils wrote about an Egyptian amulet looking at the combination of popular belief and magic in early Christianity. This fascination began in his BA where he merged the "archaeological with the historical" looking at material cultures, comparing them with historical sources written by the religious elite.

The amulets were "expressing elements of everyday life", and even if they "play on religion, they're not 'religious', they are mundane, like a prescription from the doctor."

Enrolment into the RRE Programme

Nils applied for an MA History but his BA wasn't recognised. Faced with "nothing for the year ahead", he wrote an article on Simeon Stylites, the 4th century Syrian ascetic. Halvor Moxnes, one of the Oslo-based "RRE founding fathers" contacted the newspaper requesting to be put in contact. This was August 2009; the semester was only days away and the application deadline was long gone. "Halvor worked his magic, and within two days, I was enrolled as an RRE student."

"In Oslo, there were four students ... the two weeks we spent in Rome with the others was an important start to the experience which cemented the group. I have fond memories – both academically and personally."



The Original RRE Network: Nordic scholars keeping the tradition alive

"... You can go to the Faculty of Theology at Helsinki and feel you know people" Nils said to explain the unique strength of the RRE programme in its cross-institutional makeup. He then went on to give an eye-opening account of the genesis of the RRE programme.

RRE's Roots & the Original RRE Network

"The MA RRE grew out of an RRE PhD network" revealed Nils. A founding father of the programme – Troels Engberg Pedersen – led travelling research trips in Jerusalem and Madaba. These would be week-long research tours where Nordic-based PhD candidates would gain ECTS credits. It was a lightbulb moment: that was exactly what I recall doing in Rome and Pompeii as a third cyler. "That was the original RRE network" said Nils. It was almost like "the scholars were keeping this tradition 'alive' for the next generation."

When these touring courses ended in 2013, Nils and fellow Helsinki-based first-cycler, Anna Liisa took the inspiring initiative to restart the network, rebranding it 'the Nordic Network for the Study of Judaism, Christianity and Islam in the First Millennium' (NNJCI).





Marketability of the Degree

Nils went down the academic route. He regards himself “lucky” to secure a PhD position upon graduation from the RRE programme in 2011. Post-PhD, Nils highlighted: “I also shifted my direction quite a bit.” In Norway, he observed the trend in teacher education specialising in Religious Studies.” This was an opportunity leading him to the tenured position he currently holds as Associate Professor at the University of Agder. “You have to adapt to the market”.

“You can’t think of your degree as something that will make you something like a degree in Dentistry or Engineering makes one a dentist or engineer. You need to build a career parallel to your studies ... it’s on you. The programme can only do this for you to a certain extent. It’s on the individual students to make it work.”

Is there anything you’d do differently?

“I wouldn’t change anything. Perhaps stay in touch more with colleagues. It was a great two years and I’ve been

out of touch ... I do have some contacts still, but several others have drifted. It has been 10 years, perhaps a reunion is due.”

Final advice?

“Start thinking about where you want to end up. Start thinking and positioning yourself. Reach out to institutions and businesses. Start your process before you hand in your thesis.”

THE NORDIC NETWORK FOR THE STUDY OF JUDAISM, CHRISTIANITY & ISLAM: CONTINUING THE LEGACY

Editorial by Nils Hallvard Korsvoll

Since 2015, PhD-students and junior faculty have gathered from across the Nordic countries, and beyond, for interdisciplinary seminars and excursions at important sites for the development and formation of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, under the aegis of The Nordic Network for the Study of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in the First Millennium (NNJCI: www.nnjci.mf.no).

“Today, the history of medieval Andalusia is very much attached to the idea of the mythical al-Andalusia, not only in the tourism of the area but also in terms of the questions raised about who has the right to use certain historical places and for what purpose.

Therefore, medieval Andalusia is an interesting target for historical research in today’s global world with regards to identity and politics.”

- Marika Ahonen, University of Turku, from the excursion to Andalusia in 2018.

Why NNJCI?

NNJCI was initiated by RRE alumns who sought to continue the academic (and social) networks established in both the RRE masters programme, as well as our predecessor Nordic Network for the Study of the Religious Roots of Europe. Dynamics in the Formation and Transformation of Judaism, Christianity and Islam

This was a PhD-training programme with funding through NordForsk, while NNJCI now is a more informal structure where members take turns at organising the seminars. Our excursions are both a venue to connect and cooperate among Nordic partners, as well as opportunities for specialised training and study of religious development in Antiquity and Late Antiquity, and of its contemporary reception and use.

“The seminar’s interdisciplinary and inter-institutional character are highly praiseworthy; furthermore the excursions and in situ lectures really brought our research to life and, last but not least, I have been able to

liaise with colleagues and we have agreed to engage in future joint-research projects. Very well done to the organisers for putting together such a fantastic seminar."

- Jessica van 't Westeinde, Durham University, from the excursion to Rome in 2015.

What do we do?

So far, the NNJCI has had excursions to Rome (2015), Ethiopia (2017), and Andalucia (2108). These have been seminars running for between five to ten days, which afford PhD-students 5 ECTS toward their doctoral training. Teaching and coursework is connected explicitly to the site/city/area/region that we visit, and the

participants are challenged to combine reading and research with the excursions, to delve deeper into the topics and questions for the seminar.

As a biblical scholar who spends his time with mostly written texts, it was enlightening to see how the Ethiopian Church has rewritten and recast the biblical narrative into the very landscape of Ethiopia, essentially re-creating the story from stone and making it part of Ethiopia's heritage."

- Jeremy Penner, University of Helsinki, from the excursion to Ethiopia in 2017.

NNJCI in the future

Our course for 2020 in Jerusalem was cancelled or postponed because of the corona pandemic, and we are currently waiting for a normalisation that allows for international travel. We do not know when this will be, but have plans for future seminars in Jerusalem, Greece/Turkey and Paris/Brussels. If you are interested to learn more, please follow our website and do not hesitate to get in touch.

Text and photos: Nils H. Korsvoll, NNJCI coordinator and RRE alumnus (1st cycle).

FROM KENYA TO THE DANUBE: AN RRE TEACHER'S PERSPECTIVE

It's November 2014, Martin has his camera on and is interviewing me in a café by Malmo harbour. Fast-forward the tape and it's April 2021, I'm sat in my Edinburgh flat, he's in a houseboat floating somewhere along the Danube in Serbia having just flown from a three-month stay at the Kenyan Highlands. This time round, I'm the one asking questions.

"I was very very lucky. I originally

wanted to be a pastor studying Theology. On my first day in university, I knew I wanted to stay on in academia."

How did you get involved with the RRE programme?

"By incredible luck. A spontaneous move to Copenhagen in the summer of 2009 would open doors for me." Semi-unemployed with a Classical Hebrew major from Aarhus University

Martin moved to Copenhagen just as the RRE programme was starting up. He is hired as an adjunct Hebrew and Arabic teacher.

So what was the career pathway leading to the RRE post?

"I did my PhD, but I didn't want to be a full-time researcher. I wanted to dabble in different things. I trained as a team coach and went into business. For five years, I worked with trade



unions, different ministries within the Danish government and even the former PM. The jobs were fantastic, but being a businessman was unfantastic.”

The bureaucracy, the paperwork, but most of all being a salesman of his own services were challenges alongside “not always fitting in.” He often wore the wrong clothes. “I’m more of a nerd. As a professor in a Danish university, no one cares what you dress like.”

What was it like to teach languages for the RRE programme to begin with?

“I was hired to teach Arabic and Hebrew via email.”

Via email? How did that work out?

“Antti Marjanen taught Coptic and Greek via email. His students read certain books, he’d issue assignments which he’d correct and return by email. “Can I do it by Skype?” Martin asked. “Being RRE and flexible, the

answer was: well, why not? My whole career as an online teacher started at that moment in 2009 – no one wanted to teach online”. The experience provided a leading edge as he became the Faculty’s online teaching consultant. In a Covid-19-world, “that small part of the job got big” as UCPH embraced hybrid/online teaching. The ability to tap into skills which one could leverage in the job market is “intrinsic” to RRE – it’s in the lifeblood of the programme.

Employability and Marketability

This point was poignantly highlighted by Martin as RRE’s “Achille’s heel”. The programme was never designed with employability in mind “and necessarily so because it is focused on something extremely interesting for humanity even if it isn’t inherently marketable.” There is an “extremely high percentage of PhD recipients” within the RRE alumni – about 20% end up in the doctoral trajectory.

But what about the 80%? While it may not have been “the university’s focus to help students with careers”, in the last decade or two, there has been a marked interest in employability. And currently in Denmark, the Humanities are definitely threatened. Until the 1990s, there were “two full departments” specialising in Semitic Philology; one at Copenhagen, and the other, at Aarhus University. Now, there are none.

Transmitting Knowledge to the Future Generations

Martin is a knowledge bearer transmitting a particular legacy to the future generations; but he is not worried despite the funding cuts and political debates. Knowledge of languages like Ethiopic, Aramaic, Babylonian, and Ugaritic may will be at risk of being lost in Danish universities, but “the knowledge, we’ll keep on teaching it and it will live on because it has intrinsic value; there will always be people interested, there’ll always be someone crazy enough to study it”.

What advice do you have for RRE alumni and students?

“Find your calling, where your skills meet the needs of the world. Be a social entrepreneur: some are called to be scholars; some find other ways to work

with religion. Having an entrepreneurial mindset opens up possibilities for both. Trust your natural inclination: mine was academic and I happened to be at the right place at the right time. Trust your sense of direction: to get a good life, it’s best that all the above gel. “Know thyself”, a personal maxim I’ve lived by.”

How do you see the future of RRE 10 years down the line?

“Although the political winds are not always blowing with us, there is deep support within the faculty for the RRE programme. It is an expensive programme which when compared with other areas of study like law or medicine expends a lot of resources per student; however we are a beacon of knowledge for religion. There’s a need for this in society and we provide that.”

“ The programme was never designed with employability in mind and necessarily so because it is focused on something extremely interesting for humanity even if it isn't inherently marketable. ”



RRE PHD WORKSHOPS

THE PROPOSAL THAT SPARKED A CONVERSATION & IDEA



**NILS HALLVARD
KORSVALL**

Associate Professor



**YAHYA
BARRY**

Visiting Researcher

“
the RRE alumni
network aims to boost
the number of its PhD
candidates by posting
scholarship
opportunities and
aiming to offer advice
on going through the
highly competitive
application procedures.”

This issue of the RRE alumni newsletter has put a lot of the programme's history into context. It is befitting to revisit how the RRE alumni network came about in looking at this pioneering initiative. In a series of email exchanges between Martin Ehrensvar, Jakob Engberg and Yahya Barry in October 2015, it emerged:

"We are in the process of establishing an RRE alumni network. The idea behind it is to create a sense of continuity between the interdisciplinary nature of the RRE program and the realities of life post-RRE. Simply put, the ethos is about looking out for one another. We feel that the unique nature of the program grants its students and graduates with a hugely versatile skill set which in tandem with appropriate networking, collaboration and mentorship could place its alumni in advantageous positions. As such, the RRE alumni network aims to:

a) boost the number of its PhD candidates by posting scholarship opportunities and aiming to offer advice on going through the highly competitive application procedures.

b) facilitate exchange of ideas, experiences and job-openings for graduates looking for jobs in administration, businesses, organizations and in education."

With this year marking 10 years since the graduation of the first cycle of RRE students, it is an opportune moment to create that sense of continuity and tap into the potentials that exist.

Nils, a first-cyclcder himself responded positively to the proposal. The first step of this initiative is to advertise and get participants and collaborators for the workshop. Nils and Yahya are raising awareness of the initiative in this issue of the newsletter highlighting that it is very much in 'idea phase' and they are open to ideas, suggestions and any feedback.

Yahya, the RRE alumni network coordinator can be contacted by email: yab@teol.ku.dk.