

2022 Distinguished Guest Speaker



Professor Judith Weisenfeld

**Agate Brown and George L Collord Professor
Chair, Department of Religion, Princeton University**

"Spiritual Madness: Race, Psychiatry, and Black Religion"

As the nineteenth century drew to a close, white American psychiatrists declared that mental illness among African Americans in the South had reached alarming proportions and argued that, in a notable percentage of these cases, “religious excitement” was the key precipitating factor.

This talk explores late nineteenth and early twentieth-century psychiatric theories about race, religion, and the “normal mind” and shows how the emerging specialty of psychiatry drew on works from history of religions to make racialized claims about African Americans’ “traits of character, habit, and behavior.”

This history of the intersections of psychiatry and African American religions sheds light on how ideas about race, religion, and mental normalcy shaped African American experience in courts and mental hospitals and on the role the racialization of religion played more broadly in the history of medicine, legal history, and the history of disability.