

Christianity, Identity and Social Change in Africa

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Contact Hours: 12 x two-hour seminars (6 weekly classes in Michaelmas and Lent)

This option takes an historical and anthropological approach to African Christianity, examining its complex relations with changing social and political context in Africa and beyond. Emphasis is placed upon Christianity's popular expression rather than formal theology. A number of themes predominate: 1) the relation between Christianity and other world religions, the increase in social and political scale, and the differentiation of power structures that accompanied colonialism; 2) Christianity's enduring concern of the with the search for power, prosperity and fertility; 3) the creation of alternative religious models of liberation achieved through prayer, healing, community-building and personal renewal; 4) Christianity as a source of political legitimacy and means of popular mobilization; 5) religious conversion as a route to modernity, particularly through new forms of knowledge, literacy and schooling; 6) the contribution of religious ideas, practices and texts to the formation of new identities of class, gender, ethnicity, nation and religious communities that extend beyond the nation-state.

The option will be taught by studying shifting debates about religious movements in Africa and beyond. Through the 1960s and 1980s scholars were concerned with the relationship between religion and nationalism. They examined the role of Christian independency in resistance to colonial rule and its involvement in nationalist mobilization. In the 1990s and 2000s, the focus shifted to consider the contribution of Christian groups to the formation of civil society and the rise of a public sphere, examining it as a source of democratization, development and new rights-based discourses. Other scholars have viewed so-called fundamentalist movements, Born-again Christianity/Pentecostalism, as vehicles of conservative American influence, or sought to examine them instead as creative local deployments of trans-regional ideologies that address social problems in postcolonial Africa. Most contemporary commentators have observed the increasing salience of religious idioms and ideas in political discourses, as African populations and political leaders seek out new sources of legitimacy.

Select Bibliography

- J. Campbell, *Songs of Zion. The African Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States and South Africa* (Chapel Hill, 1998)
- J. Comaroff and J. Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism and Consciousness in South Africa*, Volumes I and II (Chicago, 1991 and 1997)
- P. Gifford, *Ghana's New Christianity: Pentecostalism in a Globalising African Economy* (Bloomington, 2004)
- A. Hastings, *The Church in Africa, 1450-1950* (Oxford, 1995)
- I. Hofmeyr, *The Portable Bunyan: A Transnational History of the Pilgrim's Progress* (Princeton, 2004)
- R. Horton, 'African Conversion' *Africa* 41, 2 (1971)

- P. Landau, 'Religion and Christian Conversion in African History: A New Model' *The Journal Of Religious History* 23, 1 (1999)
- D. Maxwell, *African Gifts of the Spirit. Pentecostalism and the Rise of a Zimbabwean Transnational Religious Movement* (Athens, 2006)
- D. Maxwell, 'Photography and the Religious Encounter: Ambiguity and Aesthetics in Missionary Representations of the Luba of South East Belgian Congo' *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 53, 1 (2011)
- D. Maxwell and P. Harries (eds.) *The Spiritual in the Secular: Missionaries and Knowledge about Africa* (Grand Rapids, 2012)
- B. Meyer, 'Christianity in Africa: From African-Independent to Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches' *Annual Review of Anthropology* 33 (2004)
- JDY Peel, "'For Who Hath Despised the Day of Small Things?'" Missionary Narratives and Historical Anthropology' *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 37, 3 (1995)
- T. Ranger 'Religious Movements and Politics in sub-Saharan Africa' *African Studies Review* 29, 2 (1986)

Class Outline

1. Approaches to the Study of Christianity
2. Debates about Conversion in Africa: Indigenous Versus Alien Faiths
3. Mission Archives Online: Word and Image
4. SOAS Archives: Official Missionary Archives
5. Debates about Religious Authenticity: Mission Christians Versus Independent Christians
6. Cambridge Centre for Christianity Worldwide: Personal Missionary Papers
7. Christianity and Resistance Politics in Africa
8. Missionary Science and Medicine: Knowledge Formation and Indigenous Interlocutors
9. Literacy and Christianity
10. Transatlantic Christianities: The Ethiopian Movement and African Methodist Episcopal Church
11. The Church and Decolonization in Africa
12. Civil Society, Citizenship, Global Christianity in Postcolonial Africa