BOSTON UNIVERSITY

Department of History

History 349

History of Religion in Pre-Colonial Africa

Dr. John Thornton
African American Studies (138 Mountfort), Room 101 9:30-11:00
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Office Hours: MWF 10:30-1:00 and by appointment.

The purpose of this course will be to study the development of religion in Africa in the period before the European takeover of the continent. It will devote attention both to traditional religions of Africa and to the growth and development of Judaism, Christianity and Islam in the continent as a whole.

While there has been considerable study of religion in Africa, it has tended to be dominated either by a fairly static, ethnographic vision of African religion or a study of missionary, evangelical or proselytization activities of non-African religion. This course will adopt a historical approach and will try to explore the underlying dynamics of religion, the bases of African religions, and the nature of conversions. It will also examine the interactions and underpinnings of religion’s interaction with politics and with the politics of religious change.

This course is new, and there are likely to be some changes in its procedure. Students should be aware that you are on an adventure here, the secondary literature is limited, and some of our work will be in effect groundbreaking and dealing in unexplored territory.

Requirements and Grading

The basic class format will be lecture-discussion, with outside readings. Grades will be based on the following:

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<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tr>
<td>Mid-Term</td>
<td>30% (8 March)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Term Paper</td>
<td>30% (25 April)</td>
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<td>Final Exam</td>
<td>30% (TBA)</td>
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<td>Attendance</td>
<td>10%</td>
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A term paper proposal is due on 15 March
The mid-term examination will consist of 3 identification questions (out of 5), worth 30% of the grade, a question devoted specifically to the reading up to that point in the course (10%) followed by a choice of one out of two essay questions worth 60% of the grade.

The final examination will be two essay questions drawn from your choice of four questions (40% each), and a question based on one of the readings used since the mid-term (20%).

Students should attend all classes. If you must miss an examination or test inform me in advance, if possible. I expect all students to complete all work, so if you miss an exam, for any reason, schedule a make-up session after discussing the absence with me.

The class readings are either from the books, available for purchase at the BU Bookstore, or the other readings, which are all available in PDF format at the class website found at Blackboard on the course website.

The paper will be a 10-12 page (3,500-4,200 words) research paper. The topic of the paper will be open to any issue raised in the course, or that relates to any matter that took place in the Atlantic world in the period 1500-1825, even if it was not explicitly discussed in class.

Term papers should be based on a thesis. That is, each student should consider a controversial question that the history of this region and time period raises and propose an answer to it. The paper will then be a defense of the answer or thesis, in which data are arrayed to show why the thesis is true.

All students should supply me with written notice of their paper topic and thesis, as well as a brief bibliography. Although this will not be graded, it can provide me with a vehicle for helping you and allowing you to get your thoughts together. For best results, you should submit this proposal to me on the day of or before the mid term examination.

Submit the proposal and the final paper to me by e-mail in Word or another compatible format. Do not submit these to my Boston University Account, but to nkulu1491@yahoo.com. I will then mark these files and return them to you by e-mail.

If you have reasons to believe you cannot turn the paper in by its due date, inform me and discuss options. Late papers will be assessed a grade reduction of one third of a grade (ie an A becomes an A-) for each class sessions that the paper is late, but no paper will fail (below C) simply because of lateness. I expect each student to produce independent papers though I encourage students to discuss their ideas with each other and read and comment on each other’s papers. Plagiarized papers will be dealt with according to the CAS Academic Conduct Code. This code can be found at http://www.bu.edu/cas/students/undergrad-resources/code (for undergrads) and http://www.bu.edu/cas/students/grad-resources/forms/discipline (for grad students).

Textbooks


Nehemia Levzion and Randall Pouwels, eds. The History of Islam in Africa (Columbus, OH, 2000)

Schedule and Readings

Note while the syllabus is divided into “weeks” they are not precisely weeks, some take up only one day, others three. You should plan reading in accordance with what has already been covered in class. This is a new class, and I’m still working out how much detail goes in each one.

Week I General introduction and Religion in the Nile Valley
    Basic theological ideas: revelation, continuous and discontinuous, miracles, scriptures and traditions.
    Basic geography and historiography of Africa
    Magesa, African Religions (this can be read over several weeks, but take a bite of it here)

Week II Nile Valley Religion and Christianity
    Egyptian religion and Meroitic religion
    The Twenty fifth Dynasty, Memphite Cosmology and mysticism
    The Ethiopian eunuch and the early Church
    Syncretism in the early church, Isis cult and Mary
    The fifth century conversion of the Nobadae

Week III Christianity in Northern Africa and the Red Sea
    The Mediterranean Church: Post Chalcedon and the Roman Church
    Augustine, the Donatists and Gnostics
    The church in the desert? Garamantes
    The Western Church and Roman religion

Week IV Islam and NE Africa
    Axum and the Prophet Muhammad
    Early Islamic History
    The development of evangelical Islam and Abbasids
    Islamic law and its schools
    Reading: Martin Lingis, Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources (Rochester, VT, 1983), pp. 77-84

**Week V Christianity in Nile Valley and Ethiopia to 1500**
The Nile Valley church
Axum, Gaudit, and the Zagwe Revival
The *Kebra Negast*

**Week VI West Africa Foundations and Islamic Conversion**
What can we know about pre-Islamic West African religion?
Mixed Islam: Mali
Mixed Islam: Hausa and Kanem
The Almoravids and traditions of reform

**Week VII Islamic Maturity in Africa**
Sunni Ali and Askia Muhammad
The radical Persian Gulf Shiites
Early descriptions of Islamic sites in East Africa
Kilwa and its Islamic reach
Al-Mas’udi, description of Kilwa’s religion, internet translation.

**Week VIII Missionary Christianity: Origins**
Northern European religious syncretism, Frankish Christianity
Franciscan missions to Islam and the Mongols
Conversion of the Canary Islands
Alonso de Espinosa, *The Origins and Miracles of our Lady of Candelaria* pp. 46-64.

**Week IX Guinea Coast I (Upper Guinea)**
Guinea Coast religion in documents
The Sierra Leone and Warri experiments with Christianity
Reading: Manuel Álvares, “Minor Ethiopia”.

*Week X Guinea Coast 2 (Lower Guinea)*


*Week XI West Central Africa Foundations and Christianity*
The Christian Kingdom of Kongo
Portuguese conquest and missionaries in Angola
The Antonian movement and naturalization
Thornton, *The Kongoese Saint Anthony*.

*Week XII Religion and activity in South Africa*
Dutch Settlement on the Cape
Khoikhoi Religion
Early Missionary Activity
Reading: Peter Kolb, *The Present State of the Cape of Good Hope*, pp. 91-111.

*Week XIII East and Southeast Africa*
Religious Foundations of Mwenemutapa
Islam on the East African Coast
Christians and Converts in Southeast Africa
Catholics and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church

(revisit Pouwels’ contribution from Week VII)

*Week XIV The Islamic Revival and the Jihadist movements 1673-1830*
The foundations of revival from Almoravids
Ahamd Baba and Timbuktu
The first Jihads: Nasr al-Din and on
Usman dan Fodio and the new Revival