History of Religion in Pre-Colonial Africa

Dr. John Thornton
AAS 101  TTR 2-3:30

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Office Hours: MWF 10:30-1:00 and by appointment. I am usually in my office, and welcome students to visit; I am not always available but if you contact me first I can tell you availability.

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 Christianity and Islam. 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 its content is still very much in development. 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 reading directly from primary resources.

Requirements and Grading

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

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Requirement</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tr>
<td>Mid-Term</td>
<td>20% (3 March)</td>
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<td>Two reactions</td>
<td>20% (10% each)</td>
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<td>Term Paper</td>
<td>25% (25 April)</td>
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<td>Final Exam</td>
<td>30% (3 May, 3-5)</td>
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<td>Attendance</td>
<td>5%</td>
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A term paper proposal is due on
Each student will be required to write two reaction papers, and we will arrange the schedule when the class begins. The reaction paper will be to do that week’s reading, which is composed of a primary and a secondary source, and try to make an analysis of the primary source in terms of themes and discussions that are taking place in the class, as well as the reading.

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 term 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 deals with religion in Africa and its Diaspora before 1880.

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 such as RTF (if you use an iPad, please change the format). For best results give me a proposal as soon as we return from Spring Break (14 March). Do not submit these to my Boston University Account, but to nkuwu1491@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](http://www.bu.edu/cas/students/undergrad-resources/code) (for undergrads) and [http://www.bu.edu/cas/students/grad-resources/forms/discipline](http://www.bu.edu/cas/students/grad-resources/forms/discipline) (for grad students).

**Course Texts**

Course Outline and Reading Assignments

The outside reading that is not in textbooks is found on Blackboard Learn under the course title “African Religion.”

I have placed a series of files on Blackboard Learn based on the underlying research on which class lectures are based. They can serve as a textbook for the course, since their organization and contents are closely related to the class, and I encourage students to read these. Please understand that they are not a finished product, but are my own attempts to gather and make sense of the information I have gathered.

Note while the syllabus is divided into “topics,” they are generally but not always for one week each. You should plan reading in accordance with what has already been covered in class.

Reading and Course Outline

Topic I Introduction
Introduction: Structure and issues

Topic II Ancient Nile Valley
The Ancient Nile Valley to the Twenty-Fifth Dynasty
Hellenistic Egypt/Kush/Axum

Topic III Christianity in Northeast Africa
Hermetica/Christianity
Christianity outside the Nile Valley
Kebra Negast, ed. and trans. Wallace Budge, pp. 16-72.

Topic IV The Birth and Development of Islam
The development of Axum and the birth of Islam
Islamic consolidation

Topic V The Western Sudan and Islam
Western Sudan: Religious background
Western Sudan: Islamization and its particularities

Topic VI Northeast and North Central African Developments
Traditional religion and Islam in the Central Sudan
From Axum to the Kingdom of Ethiopia
“The Kano Chronicle” ed H. R. Palmer

Topic VII Islam in the Nile Valley and East African Coast
Christianity and Islam in Nubia to 1500
East African coast
Al-Mas’udi, description of Kilwa’s religion, internet translation

Topic VIII European Expansion
European Christianity and missionary religion
Mid-term Examination
Alonso de Espinosa, The Origins and Miracles of our Lady of Candelaria pp. 46-64.

Topic IX Religious Life of the Upper Guinea Coast
Tradition and Islam in Upper Guinea
Upper Guinea and Jihads
Reading: Manuel Álvares, “Minor Ethiopia”.

Topic X Religious Life of the Lower Guinea Coast
Akan and the Bight of Benin: Religious developments
Benin and the Bight of Biafara

Topic XI Central Africa: Christianity and Tradition
Traditional religion foundations
Christianity in Kongo and Portuguese Angola
Reading: Olifert Dapper’s Description of Loango religion.
Thornton, *The Kongoese Saint Anthony*.

**Topic XII Southern Africa**
Religion and social organization in South Africa
The Nguni regions
Reading: Peter Kolb, *The Present State of the Cape of Good Hope*, pp. 91-111.

**Topic XIII Southeast Africa and the Portuguese**
Southeast Africa and Portuguese Mozambique
East Africa and Ethiopia
(revisit Pouwels’ contribution from Week VII)

**Topic XIV Religious Reform in West Africa**
The great Jihads of the nineteenth century
The African Diaspora (if time permits)