

The Anthropology and History of Conversion

AS 100.456
Spring 2001
Gilman Hall 315
Monday, 10-12
The Johns Hopkins University
Department of History

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Course Description

This is a reading and research seminar in which we will explore Christian communities and conversion from anthropological and historical perspectives. Beginning as an obscure cult in the eastern Mediterranean, Christianity has become a powerful and influential world religion practiced around the globe in dramatically different communities and cultures. Despite the manifest significance of Christianity and its continuing geographical and numerical spread, most college students and their professors (even in religious studies) devote surprisingly little attention to conversion, usually interpreted as the way in which persons affiliate with a Christian community. But conversion can--and indeed should--more broadly be understood as transformations and changes in the context of the exchanges and relationships between Christian communities and their others. Personal and social changes occur as persons affiliate themselves with Christian communities. In turn, Christian communities and their modes of religious expression and theological understanding are often converted--transformed--but new converts and their ways in the process. Conversion is many things simultaneously, and we shall explore some of these things in this course.

We shall not attempt to explain why any single individual chooses to affiliate with a Christian community, nor shall we judge the quality of converts' religious commitment. The former is unknowable, a matter of religious experience (or "between a person and God" in common Christian parlance); the latter, a theological question of no academic significance (even a religious exercise of dubious legitimacy and wisdom). Rather, we shall interest ourselves in the hows of conversion, and especially in how anthropologists and historians interpret conversion, emphasizing the human relationships, social milieux, and intellectual contexts in which Christian persuasion and transformation take place.

Because this is a secular study, we shall examine conversions from the perspective of outsiders to Christian faith. While it is possible this course may enrich your own faith, if you are seeking a collective religious experience this course will be a disappointment.

The professor is an atheist. He grew up as a missionary kid in Madagascar. He is currently writing a book on the relationships between British missionaries and highland Malagasy between 1820 and 1836, with special attention to the translation of the Bible into the Malagasy language. He wishes historians of Africa would pay greater attention to the intellectual and experiential history of Christian faith.

The course will be challenging and interesting. Welcome--let's have fun while we work!

Course Readings

All the course readings will also be available either in [MSEL Reserves](#) or on the web.

Required Books: Available (or to become available) in the Homewood Bookstore

- Karl F. Morrison. Understanding Conversion (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1992).
- Birgit Meyer, Translating the Devil: Religion and Modernity among the Ewe in Ghana (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999).
- Vicente Raphael, Contracting Colonialism: Translation and Christian Conversion in Tagalog Society Under Early Spanish Rule (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993).
- John and Jean Comaroff, Of Revelation and Revolution vol. 2 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, date).

Required Books: Out of Print (arrangements will be made for these)

- Rowena Robinson. Conversion, Continuity and Change: Lived Christianity in Southern Gowa (London: Sage, 1998).
- Louise M. Burkhart, The Slippery Earth: Nahua-Christian Moral Dialogue in Sixteenth-Century Mexico (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1989). This book is being read during weeks three and four. You will find copies of the reading outside the professor's office door, 404 Gilman Hall. Please copy the reading and return it to the floor outside the professor's door, where you got it from.

Required Articles and Parts of Books

Are listed in the [schedule](#) and may be found in [Eisenhower Reserves](#) in either print or electronic format.

Course Requirements

1. Attendance and participation. This needs no explanation and will figure in your grade. I expect you to be responsible and to notify me or have me notified *in advance* of an absence.

2. Weekly thought papers. Weekly thought papers are entirely informal and short, consisting of one or two pages, single spaced. One page is entirely acceptable and sufficient; I discourage writing more than one page but you may go to a second page if you wish. Weekly papers must be typed but do not require editing or careful attention to style. In your thought paper you should first summarize the main argument of the reading. Then identify three or more issues for course discussion. These items should not be simple questions for the professor or that have yes/no answers. They should be thoughtful issues that you can raise for discussion as we sit about the table. Thought papers will be collected by the Professor at the end of class. Thought papers will not be returned to you unless they are found to be unsatisfactory. In other words, unless you hear from the professor otherwise your thought papers are acceptable and will not adversely affect your grade.

3. Co-facilitation of one course discussion. Seminar discussions require persons to direct and facilitate them, and to keep the talk moving if silence descends. Usually the professor does this. However, in each class session one or two students will also be responsible for facilitating discussion. This means you will need to read the assigned reading especially carefully for that week and come to class with a series of issues to guide discussion. This is your chance to demonstrate erudition and leadership! I am looking for one or two persons to volunteer to help facilitate discussion on our first meeting, February 5. If you would like to do this and get it over with early, in addition to clocking up brownie points for being courageous, please email the professor. The professor will always be there to help in the facilitation (the "co" in "co-facilitation" refers to the professor).

4. A research project on conversion in highland Madagascar. This will be a major research project utilizing primary materials and must result in a substantial paper of at least 30 pages wherein you develop your own academic arguments about conversion in a particular context. The primary research material will be provided by the professor on print reserve in MSEL (after the first course meeting). The bulk of that material consists of the letters and journals written by British missionaries in highland Madagascar and sent back to their bosses in London. There are other materials available to supplement this core of data. You must begin research on this project immediately because if you neglect to do so, you will be unable to complete the assignment satisfactorily for a desirable grade. This project will be challenging and time consuming, and you must continue to work on your research over the course of the semester. For more information, visit the research section of this web site.

Research Projects

The Task

Research projects are to result in major papers of at least 30 pages long. Besides the weekly reading and informal papers, this is the major work of the course and your grade will be substantially based on it. Your task is to research and write about conversion in highland Madagascar either during 1820-1835 or 1861-1877. Most of the primary data is supplied for you by the professor; other data, especially from books published at or near that time, you will have to locate and acquire yourself using the library, interlibrary loan, other libraries, or the Library of Congress.

The Data

The primary dataset consists of the archives of the London Missionary Society. The London Missionary Society (LMS), a Protestant organization, was formed in 1795, in London, by nonconformists and dissenters, i.e. persons opposed to the establishment of the Church of England (Anglican church). The LMS was the first missionary society to operate in Highland Madagascar. Its missionaries lived and evangelized in highland Madagascar between 1820 and 1836 (the "first mission"), and again from 1861 into the twentieth century (the "second mission"). In their writings, the LMS missionaries provided a huge amount of data about highland Madagascar and religious transformations there. The data made available to you are the professor's notes, which consist of copied, typed passages from the original letters and journals of these missionaries. These will be found in the print reserves section of MSEL after the first course meeting.

Getting Started

The best way to get started is to decide if you want to work on the first or the second mission (ambitious persons may elect to work on both), and then to begin reading through the letters to see what the missionaries say (the LMS letters will not be available until after our first class meeting on February 5). Reading will begin to provide you with ideas about what kind of conversion were occurring and how. Over time, you will develop questions and interpretations about what was happening in highland Madagascar. Because others in the class will be reading the same material, you can discuss your ideas with them. So my advice is: plunge right in and start reading as soon as the material is made available during the first week of February. If you procrastinate, it will get ugly toward the end of the semester when you realize you are not prepared to write your paper. We can discuss your readings in class, and you are always welcome to contact the professor privately. Talking with other students about their findings individually or through the course [listserv](#) is encouraged. For some background you may want to consult the following works (these will be fully provided only during the first week of February):

Early Period, 1820-1836

- Pier M. Larson, "'Capacities and Modes of Thinking:' [American Historical Review](#) (1997)
- William Ellis, ed., [History of Madagascar: Comprising also the Progress of the Christian Mission Established in 1818; and an Authentic Account of the Persecution and Recent Martyrdom of the Native Christians](#) (London: John Snow, 1838), 2 vols.
- Bonar Gow, [Madagascar and the Protestant Impact](#)
- David Johns & David Griffiths, [The Martyr Church](#)

Later Period, c. 1861-1877

- Bonar Gow, [Madagascar and the Protestant Impact](#)
- James Sibree
- T.T. Matthews
- Price
- William Ellis

As You Get Into It

You may wish to further consult published and unpublished material from the 19th century written by some of the missionaries whose letters and journals you are reading. Some of these materials are in MSEL, but much is not. You may wish to order additional books by interlibrary loan, or to visit the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. You may also read originals of these letters on microfiche (to see what they look like, for example, or to try and find things the professor did not take notes about during his own reading of the materials). I highly encourage you to enrich your reading of the letters and journals with additional materials such as these.

Class Organization

Class meets once a week on Monday morning in Gilman Hall 315, the History Seminar Room. At each class we will sit around a table and discuss both the week's assigned reading and our research on conversion in highland Madagascar. There are no lectures. You must complete the assigned reading each week by the Monday morning meeting. In addition, you must bring your weekly thought papers with you to the seminar. They will serve as the basis for your participation in the discussion. Between class meetings, you are encouraged to communicate individually with the professor or with the entire class through our listserv.

Reading and Assignment Schedule

Week one: 29 January

No meeting.

Readings: None; please read the material for week two.

Week two: 5 February

Book: Burkhart, The Slippery Earth, first half (made available in class on 29 January; you will find copies of this reading on the floor outside the professor's office door, 404 Gilman Hall. Please copy the reading and return it back to the floor outside the professor's door, 404 Gilman Hall).

Week three: 12 February

Book: Burkhart, The Slippery Earth, second half.

Article: To be posted.

Week four: 19 February

Book: Morrison, Understanding Conversion, ix-91.

Article: To be announced.

Week five: 26 February

Book: Morrison, Understanding Conversion, 92-194.

Article: To be announced.

Week six: 5 March

Book: Comaroff & Comaroff, Of Revelation and Revolution, first half.

Article: To be posted.

Week seven: 12 March

Book: Comaroff & Comaroff, Of Revelation and Revolution, second half.

Article: To be announced.

Week eight: 26 March

Book: Robinson, Conversion, Continuity and Change, 9-115.

Article: to be announced.

Week nine: 2 April

Book: Robinson, Conversion, Continuity and Change, 116-215

Article: to be announced.

Week ten: 9 April

Book: Raphael, Contracting Colonialism, first half.

Article: to be announced.

Week eleven: 16 April

Book: Raphael, Contracting Colonialism, second half.

Article: to be announced.

Week twelve: 23 April

Book: Meyer, Translating the Devil, first half.

Article: to be announced.

Week thirteen: 30 April

Book: Meyer, Translating the Devil, second half.

Article: to be announced.