

CGCM NEWS

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A Conference in Review: Looking Back on “African Christian Biography”



From left to right: Michèle Sigg (DACB), Jim Ault (with camera), Deborah Gaitskell, Heather Hughes, Dana Robert (CGCM), and Andrew Barnes attend the conference’s opening reception in Boston University’s African Studies Library.

This past October, the Center for Global Christianity and Mission presented the conference “African Christian Biography: Narratives, Beliefs, and Boundaries.” The reason for the gathering was twofold. In the first place, it marked the 20th anniversary of the founding of the Dictionary of African Christian Biography

(DACB), which was spearheaded by Jonathan Bonk at the Overseas Ministry Study Center in New Haven, CT. The project has since moved to Boston University, along with its director and CGCM student Michèle Sigg.

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This edition of the CGCM News reviews the highly successful conference on African Christian Biography held at Boston University from October 29-31. It also includes an editorial that invites both scholars of African Christianity and African Christians to consider the ways we engage with each other.





Lamin Sanneh is the D. Willis James Professor of World Christianity and Mission at Yale Divinity School. He is also the author of *Translating the Message* (1989).

The conference also hoped to create an opportunity for interdisciplinary connections. While the study of African Christianity has found a home in many academic departments, historians, political scientists, anthropologists, literary theorists, theologians, and academically inclined religious leaders do not always have a chance to talk with each other across disciplines. This meeting provided an opportunity to build some of those bridges.

The conference opened on Thursday, October 29 in the African Studies collection of Mugar Library, where librarians had set up an extensive display showcasing some of the library's resources and presenter's publications. At dinner that evening, Jon Bonk shared his insights into the past, present, and future of the DACB.

Friday was abuzz with activity. In the morning, Lamin Sanneh delivered a plenary lecture before various participants dispersed into a wide array of concurrent paper sessions. That evening, Timothy Longman, Kathleen Sheldon, Richard Elphick, and Diana Wylie spoke on a panel that navigated the possibilities and limits of biography for academic inquiry into Christianity

Jon Bonk is Research Professor of Mission at Boston University and Executive Director Emeritus of the Overseas Ministry Study Center. He was the founder of the Dictionary of African Christian Biography.

in Africa. That night, while participants enjoyed a formal meal at BU's "Castle," Linda Heywood delivered a fascinating lecture on Queen Njinga of Ndongo and Matamba—the subject of her upcoming book.

Saturday morning brought two more breakaway sessions with an array of interesting papers. Finally, Joel Carpenter, Andrew Barnes, and Jon Bonk gave a wrap up response to the conference.

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Below, left to right: Timothy Longman, Kathleen Sheldon, Richard Elphick, and Diana Wylie.





Conference participants from a wide variety of academic and national backgrounds built new relationships over food and conversation.

The conference definitely fulfilled both of its goals. It was a fitting celebration of the DACB's 20th anniversary, and it also got scholars talking across disciplines. Already, these conversations and contacts have born a great deal of fruit, and the CGCM looks forward to potential future gatherings. 🙏

Negotiating Church and Academy in the Study of African Christianity

Stephen Lloyd

For scholars interested in western Christianity, the resources are boundless. Not only is there a wealth of translated and heavily annotated primary sources, there is also a long academic tradition. Students can easily learn English, German, French, Latin, or Greek at any major research university. One can study Christianity without having to deal with Christians.

This is nearly impossible in the study of African Christianity. Certainly, there are some



Linda Heywood is professor of African History and the History of the African Diaspora and African American Studies at Boston University. Her upcoming book, *African Goddess: Queen Njinga Mbandi of Angola* will be published by Harvard University Press.

areas where a purely academic study is possible. Ethiopia has a long literary tradition providing scholars (who are able to learn requisite languages) with some resources. The racial politics of South Africa have been the fountainhead of academic studies, and much of this material deals directly with role of Christianity. There are countless missionary journals, diaries, papers, and letters on miles of microfilm in archives and Internet servers around the world.

Yet the stories of so many African Christians remain at best obscure. The African women and men who worked to spread Christianity and make it pastorally relevant to nearly half of the continent's population are, for the most part, completely unknown. Poor infrastructure and communication capacities along with other difficulties complicate contact between many parts of Africa and the rest of the world. Outside scholars interested

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Upcoming Events for Spring 2016

January 26 **Lowell Event, “The Black Church Never Left the Outdoors: Eco-Justice and Environmentalism”**

February 9 **Jon Bonk, “A Traveller’s Tale: Personal Observations on Christianity in China and Korea”**

February 26 **Costas Consultation, “Interpreting the Signs of the Times: Contemporary Challenges for African Christianity”**

March 1 **Septemmy Lakawa, “World Christianity, an Indonesian Story”**

March 17-18 **Grant Wacker, “Billy Graham and the Dynamics of World Christianity”**

March 28 **Paula Kline, “Linking Workplace Policy and Theology”**

April 14-15 **Allan Anderson, “The Pentecostal Leavening of World Christianity”**

Stephen Lloyd edited this edition of the CGCM News. For more information about the Center, visit our website www.bu.edu/cgcm or write to cgcm@bu.edu.

in studying African Christianity are further limited by shrinking funding to religious studies and the humanities.

This is why local communities are so indispensable for mapping the history of African Christianity. Local African Christians have a level of access that foreign academics will never have. This point of access has been and will continue to be a great strength for projects such as the DACB, which rely on African Christians to submit their own stories. For their part, academic institutions can offer African Christians platforms and resources for documenting and preserving their history, teachings, and practices. The CGCM’s “Old and New in Shona Religion” website is one example of a western institution preserving African Christian history.

Yet the relationship between “Church” and “Academy” is not always an easy one. At the biography conference, it became clear that academics and religious practitioners, while sharing some concerns, aim at different goals when writing biographies. Religious biographies are published to be edifying to believers, or they might focus on the spiritual achievements of a tradition’s founder. Academics tend either to discount “the supernatural,” or at the very least hold it in abeyance. They also apply analytic tools to religious leaders that might be considered offensive to that leader’s followers.

In other academic disciplines, the Church and the secular Academy have the luxury of being able to ignore each other. Yet the study of African Christianity, especially beyond its missionary or colonial expressions, requires academics and religious practitioners to engage with each other. As we continue this necessary relationship, the secular Academy and religious institutions need to negotiate what our relationship will look like. Even those with a foot in both camps—i.e. religious academics—know that there are always points of incommensurability. At the conference, a number of voices suggested approaching this engagement with humility. This is an excellent starting place, but it does not answer questions about the responsibilities academics have to their contacts *and* to the Academy, nor does it address the responsibilities religious leaders have to their communities. These questions, with corresponding fundamental methodological implications, deserve a fuller examination than they hitherto received. Perhaps a future conference is in order. 🙏