

---

The logo features the letters 'AAR' in a large, bold, serif font. A thick, black, curved line arches underneath the letters. To the right of 'AAR', the words 'BOOK REVIEW' are written in a smaller, bold, sans-serif font.

---

*Religions in Contemporary Africa: An Introduction.* By Laura S. Grillo, Adriaan van Klinken, and Hassan J. Ndzovu. Routledge, 2019. 244 pages. \$150.00 (cloth), \$39.95 (paper).

Textbooks, though much maligned, perform essential work in the academy. They articulate itineraries for a field of study and outline its essential data and modes of interpretation. Geared toward students with no previous knowledge, they initiate the uninitiated into an intellectual community. Perhaps most importantly, textbooks are physical (and now virtual) objects that embody a field's claims of utility. Textbooks take up intellectual space and make a play for academic resources.

Such space is woefully lacking for the academic study of African religions. Despite the centrality of African slavery and imperial control of the continent to the making of the modern world, the study of African religions remains at the periphery of English-language religious studies scholarship. Perhaps the best measure of its marginality is the dearth of hires in the field. According to American Academy of Religion employment statistics, 210 of the 7,268 jobs advertised between 2003 and 2016 were devoted to religions of Africa or the African diaspora. Africa is the second most populous continent in the world, but in the academic study of religion it has merited fewer than 3 percent of all jobs. The field's hiring practices sustain the anti-Black racist foundations of the discipline. Africa remains, for the most part, invisible.

The appearance of any textbook on African religions is thus a rare occurrence. Whereas teachers of North American religions can choose from works by Sydney Ahlstrom, Catherine Albanese, Jon Butler, Edwin Gaustad, Julia Corbett Hemeyer, Charles Lippy, Jacob Neusner—and the list keeps going with more recent additions—teachers of African religions have very few options. Textbooks include John Mbiti's classic but problematic intro and one by Benjamin Ray. So, it is a joy to see a press issuing a new textbook, any textbook at all.

*Religions in Contemporary Africa*, co-written by an African expert on Islam, an American expert on indigenous religions, and a European expert on Christianity,

offers a novel approach to the topic. Focusing on sub-Saharan African indigenous religions, Christianity, and Islam, the heart of the book explores the intersection of religion with contemporary African politics, society, and culture. More than half of the book presents balanced, informative, and accessible discussions of African religions and witchcraft, political power, conflict and peacemaking, development, human rights, health care and illness, gender, sexuality, and media. Summarizing different scholarly approaches to these topics, the authors avoid tendencies in African studies either to romanticize or to vilify religion. Extensive sidebars, one of the book's strongest elements, recount concrete case studies to illuminate each chapter's more general points and explore religious phenomena in a number of different countries. Thus we learn about South African President Jacob Zuma's appeal to his ancestors; Zambia's official status as a Christian nation; the politicization of Islam in Kenya; the role of churches in the Rwandan genocide; the Federation of Muslim Women's Associations in Ghana; African traditional medicine in Senegal; Igbo genital power; and much more. By analyzing religion as part of culture and society, the book can be successfully incorporated into introductory courses in Africana studies and other disciplines outside of religious studies. Moreover, this second half of the book, which runs a little over one hundred pages, can be likely used independently from the first half of the book.

Part I is quite different from Part II. In this section, an introduction to contemporary African indigenous religions, Christianity, and Islam, the authors use varying approaches to their subject matter. Two chapters on indigenous religions adopt a phenomenological methodology that accounts for the way various sub-Saharan religions, first, orient humans in the cosmos, second, "reveal and engage the invisibles" through divination, sacrifice, and the use of power objects and masking (24), and, third, "empower practitioners" through "possession trance" and other rituals (32). A later chapter on neo-traditional religious movements emphasizes the use of indigenous tradition to respond to post-colonial and globalizing trends, including violent rebellion against the state and the forging of pan-African ties across national boundaries. Taking a different tack, the introductory chapters on Christianity employ a more institutional as opposed to phenomenological narrative. Readers are exposed to Ethiopian Orthodoxy, Western missionary Christianity, African-initiated Christianity, and in a later chapter, to the ethics and doctrines of Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity's focus on the prosperity gospel, spiritual warfare against witchcraft, and healing. Finally, two chapters on Islam attempt to summarize the scholarly debates over the Islamization of Africa and the Africanization of Islam in addition to analyzing the role of Salafism and Wahhabism in African life.

Speaking from my vantage point as a teacher at a working-class, public university in the American Midwest, if I were to use this textbook as the backbone of an intro to African religions course, I would want to supplement the chapters on African indigenous religions and Christianity, and perhaps because of my own expertise and preferences, take a different approach to covering Islam. In

the introduction, which rightly takes account of the politics of studying African religions, the authors declare their intent to study what religions “do” rather than what they “are” (10). Though the chapters on African indigenous religions effectively accomplish this goal, I found myself wanting more details. It is hard for many students, no matter what their background, to see African indigenous religions beyond stereotypes of “Voodoo.” More thick description might help them understand how these spiritual technologies work. (One can only include so many words, but at 244 pages the volume runs on the shorter side for a textbook.) The chapters on Christianity effectively and usefully describe its different denominations, but I would want to include more information on how African Christians pray, sing, and dance; celebrate holidays; baptize their youth; conduct weddings; and bury their dead—in other words, what religion does in terms of life passages, rituals, and material culture. I would also need to include some basics about the Bible and doctrines such as the Trinity and Incarnation in African contexts. Similarly, in introducing students to Islam in Africa, I would have to do some scaffolding before students would be able to understand many of the book’s claims. Several difficult ideas and contested terms are referenced without providing definitions or context, including jihad (53), Arab subjugation (55), and orthodoxy (58). My approach would be to first cover widely shared Islamic practices such as fasting during Ramadan, pilgrimage to Mecca and sacred sites in Africa, philanthropy and charity, and above all, prayer—not only *salat* (the prescribed prayers of prostration) but also *du’a* (supplicatory prayer) and *dhikr* (religious litanies). Instead of focusing on the Africanization of Islam and the Islamization of Africa, which are difficult concepts to grasp when students know nothing about Africa or Islam, I would outline how African Muslims themselves developed the Shari’a (especially the Maliki school of *fiqh*); Sufism (including religious orders, the shrines of saints, and poetry); and Qur’anic studies as essential elements of their religion, and how those Islamic traditions have been adopted, adapted, and resisted by modern Muslim reform movements.

One question that remains with me after reading the book is the meaning of modernity and its impact on African religions. The “modern,” “modernity,” and “modernizing” are everywhere, but are never systematically defined. Modernity is discussed alongside ideas about Pentecostalism, individualization, urban growth, neoliberal economics, disenchantment, religious reform, technological progress, secularization, rationality, economic development, imperialism, indigenization, and allopathic medicine, among other topics (79, 81, 85, 91, 119, 148, 160, 164, 190). It is not clear whether certain interpretations of modernity are more important than others. For example, is modernity something that is largely external to and imposed upon Africa—first through colonialism and then through globalization? To what extent have Africans participated in the making of modernity? Though the authors are right to limit the scope of their textbook to what is already a rich set of countries and regions in sub-Saharan Africa, the focus on religion in contemporary Africa does provide an opportunity to scrutinize

more fully how religion and religious actors more generally have shaped and been shaped by global modernity. Industrial capitalism, racial colonialism, and nationalism, among other characteristics of the modern world, matter to religion everywhere—as much to London as Lusaka. Locating Africa inside of or as a part of global modernity might help students see how Christians, Muslims, and practitioners of African indigenous religions create, sustain, and resist the often horrible and awesome consequences of modernity.

Overall, *Religions in Contemporary Africa* represents a significant step toward that goal. By placing African religions at the center rather than the margins of religious studies, this textbook gives the discipline's practitioners the chance to reflect on the absence of African voices and experiences in its classrooms and to imagine a future for the field beyond its imperial and racist roots. I hope its arrival signals the imminent appearance of many other such efforts.

doi:10.1093/jaarel/lfz038

Edward E. Curtis IV  
Indiana University School of Liberal Arts, Indianapolis