



# MARYKNOLL INSTITUTE OF AFRICAN STUDIES



## 2006 COURSE CATALOGUE

NAIROBI, KENYA

### Course: MARY AFST 546: African Traditional Religion Interprets the Bible

#### Course overview:

The course investigates the underlying basic requirements of a truly African method of interpreting the Bible and compares it with the Historical Critical Method. The aim of the course is to guide the students to appropriate an authentic African exegesis of the bible in order that they might proclaim its message in symbols and values that are immediate to Africans.

#### Course Description:

Most Bible commentaries and everyday written exposition of scriptural texts generally presuppose European and North American cultural thought patterns. This is quite evident in the much accepted Historical Critical Method. As an alternative to this way of interpretation, this course will offer students a chance to investigate the African way of understanding biblical culture and milieu in terms of African culture and milieu. It investigates whether it is possible to arrive at concrete African hermeneutic principles. It asks how Africans read the Bible and profitably inculcate the ever enduring biblical message into their existential situation without a historical critique of the biblical settings. It asks what Africans understand the Bible to say on issues such as: Marriage and the Family, African Contemporary Culture, Bridewealth, Rites of Passage, Death and Rites of Incorporation into life after death.

The students will seek to find out how Africans read and interpret the Bible through field research involving participation, observation and interviews in the following situations:

- Street preaching
- Independent and Pentecostal Services
- Mainline church services
- Bible colleges
- Bible unions in schools
- Campus ministries including New Age Religions.
- Scripture professors

This will be contrasted with the Historical Critical Method as applied to specific biblical passages.

**Course Outline:****I. Introduction:**

The introductory section will deal with: 1) a review of the standard hermeneutic principles seen as necessary for understanding the bible and the common fallacies connected with this; 2) the issue of trying to define what can be called African exegesis.

## a. What is biblical criticism

Basic hermeneutic principles

## b. Definition of the term African exegesis.

African approach to the Bible

**II. African Exegesis: African method of understanding and interpreting specific bible passages.**

1) Analysis of Old Testament passages dealing with Poetic and Historical narrative from an African perspective.

a) Poetic Narratives such as myths, fairy-tales, sagas, legends, anecdotes, and tales.

b) Historical narratives such as reports, popular history, accounts of dreams and visions.

2) Analysis of Old Testament passages which deal with sayings or teachings of various kinds from an African perspective:

Cultic sayings, Prophetic sayings, Proverbs and Wisdom sayings.

3) Analysis of Old Testament passages dealing with songs from an African perspective:

Songs of work and harvest, songs of marriage and love, watchman's songs, mocking songs and funeral dirges, victory songs and cultic songs.

4) Analysis of selected New Testament gospel narratives and their African interpretation:

Jesus Christ: How is His Lordship understood. The church: its identity and membership. Discipleship: witnessing, sacraments. The parousia: millennial trends today. Marriage and the family. Satan: witchcraft, demonic possession and exorcism. Parables of Jesus. Miracle stories. Exorcisms and sayings of Jesus.

5) Analysis of selected Pauline letters from the perspective of African culture and milieu:

Passages from Romans, 1 Corinthians and II Thessalonians. Analysis of the New Testament milieu versus African milieu.

6) Analysis from pastoral Epistles. I & II Timothy, Titus.

### III. Exegetical Exercises from the Old and New Testament

1) Old Testament. Genesis 12:1-10 The story of Abraham.

- a) Go from your country: v-1, Migration, Nomadism and the African Social, Religious and cultural experience.
- b) The "land of your fathers" (v.1) vs the "land of promise." The African concept of the House
- c) "I will bless you" (v.2) African concept of Blessing and Curse (v.3)
- d) "the Oak of Moreh" in Shechem, sacred trees, sites and peace.
- e) "To your descendants, I will give you this land" (v.7). The place of land in the African religious experience.
- f) "to your descendants" (v.7). The promise is to a community not individuals. The African community and the individual.
- g) "He built the altar" (v.7) The role of altars and sacrifices in the African Religion.
- h) "called the name of the Lord" (v.8) God's name in African Religion
- i) "Famine in the land" hardships, hunger and survival in African Religion

2) The New Testament (Mt. 9:20-22; Mk. 5:25-34; Lk. 8:43 - 48): the story of the woman with the flow of blood

- a. The miraculous in African Religion
- b. Blood and all its associations in African Religion
- c. The woman and her predicament, place and roles in African religious and cultural experience.
- d. The power (spiritual) of Jesus going out of him into the woman
- e. The faith of the woman. How faith is understood in the significance of taboos in African religion
- f. Woman touching Jesus in a state of flow of blood.
- g. Woman made well (healed). Healing, health and well-being in African Religion
- h. Take heart daughter: the extent of kinship relations in African society
- i. Suffered under many physicians. The true and false healers in African societies. The vulnerability of the sick due to their trust in healers.
- j. "Heard reports about Jesus." Communication in African society.
- k. "Who touched me?" " The woman told the whole truth." The fear of hiding the truth on religious grounds. The African system of extracting information and inducing confessions.

3) Other texts from the Old and New Testament covering other issues will be utilized to develop an African hermeneutic based on African religious heritage.

#### IV. Summary: Towards an authentic African exegesis of the Bible.

##### a. The unique structures of African exegesis: the underlying hermeneutic principles.

1. The Bible is a community document with a message for and to a community with desires, problems, hopes and fears similar to those prevalent in the African communities.
2. The message of the Bible is not merely a historical one about a distant people but one belonging to the present life condition of persons and communities. The focus is on what the Bible tells the community today.
3. The Bible has a message of faith to be taken seriously. You obey it to your good or ignore it to your peril.
4. The message of the Bible is practical and involving. You read it not merely to know but to do what it says.
5. The basic aim of the message of the Bible is to save people from the impending catastrophes whether political, economic, social or religious. The Bible is the bringer of the message of hope.
6. The Bible, like the seers and mediums of African cultures, warns, gives counsel, enlightens people on matters pertaining to all aspects of their lives
7. The Bible is not just a book; it is the Spirit of God speaking directly to God's people and has power to instantly bring about the reality of its warnings or promises.
8. The bible is very frank; it does not shy away from saying what must be said or attempt to disguise its message or present itself in diplomatic pleasantries.

##### b. Comparison of African and historical critical exegesis

1. Areas of agreement with the historical critical exegesis
2. Areas of conflict with the historical critical method
3. Problem areas.

##### c. Proposed projects for research

1. The family in the Bible and African tradition.
2. Initiation rites - baptism, confirmation, marriage and funerals as rites of passage in the scriptures and African tradition.
3. The concept of sin, alienation and curse in scriptures and African traditions.
4. Salvation, healing and Wholeness in Scriptures and African tradition.
5. God, Spirits, Angels, Demons and the "spirit world" in Scriptures and African Tradition.
6. The individual and the community rights and obligations in scriptures and African tradition.
7. Parents, elders and ancestors in scriptures and African tradition.
8. The church as "clan" kinship relations, or extended family in the

Scriptures and African tradition

9. Parenting, socialization of the young and transmission of values in scriptures and African tradition.

10. Death and life beyond in Scriptures and African tradition.

11. The bible comes to advocate the cause of the weak and the poor demanding the restoration of their dignity and rights. It's message is often a response to the cry of the suffering and the oppressed.

12. The bible means what it says, basically. If the sowers went to "sow" in one of the parables of Jesus, the basic message is that of sowing real seeds - maize, beans and millet, not merely sowing the "word of God." They are also the sowers of life-giving seeds.

13. The message of the Bible is not always positive. Sometimes it condemns and curses and can be as harsh as the angry ancestors of the African heritage. Such a message of condemnation, when appropriate must be given prominence.

14. All the promises given in the Bible are taken seriously. They cannot be broken, nor can they fail. "Ahadi ya Bwana haivujiji milele" is a popular tune of how serious Africans take the promises of God found in the Scriptures. The Bible is therefore a book of hope.

#### TEXT BOOKS:

Mbiti, J.S. (1986). *Bible and Theology In African Christianity*. Nairobi: Oxford University Press.

Dickson, K.A. (1969). *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs*. New York: Orbis Books.

Mugambi, J.N.K. and Laurenti Magesa (Eds). (1989). *Jesus in African Christianity: Experimentation and Diversity in African Christology*. Nairobi: Initiative Publishers.

Shorter, A. (1973). *African Culture and the Christian Church*. London: Geoffrey Chapman.

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Hillman, Eugene. (1993). *Towards an African Christianity: Inculturation Applied*. New York: Paulist Press.

Arbuckle, G.A. (1990). *Earthing the Gospel: An Inculturation Handbook for Pastoral Workers*. New York: Orbis.

***ATTN: This course can substitute for the course on African Traditional Religion: Major beliefs, Practices and Contemporary Forms, a required course for students registered in the Master degree programs.***