

Religious Conflict and Reconciliation in South Sudan

For the summer of 2009 I plan to conduct research towards a senior thesis in Religious Studies on the convergence of Christianity and traditional religion in southern Sudan. My project will attempt to explain how this interaction contributes to attitudes toward conflict in two areas: the religious ideology driving insurgent religious-political movements, and reconciliation between groups and society under peaceful conditions. I will spend the first four weeks of summer researching religious beliefs and practices of Central Africa, the history and effects of Christian missionary work in the area, and religious militias such as the Lord's Resistance Army. The next six weeks I will conduct field research during an unpaid internship working at a school in south Sudan.

The internship requires me to investigate some aspect of anthropology in the area of West Equatoria and gives me a unique opportunity to come to some understanding of religious motivation for conflict and conflict resolution in the war-torn area of southern Sudan. It will provide invaluable experience in field research and produce a relevant senior thesis that will contribute to an understanding of the religious elements of insurgency and reconciliation in an area that has suffered political strife between northern Muslims and southern Christians and animists almost continually since independence in 1956.

The convergence of traditional beliefs with Christianity in the Nile region of Central Africa has given rise to conflict between militias and governments ever since the forced unification under colonialism ended. Figures such as Alice Lakwena of the Holy Spirit Mobile Forces and Joseph Kony of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) have led religious militias against the government of Uganda, claiming to be mediums for the Holy Spirit as well as ancestral spirits of the Acholi people of Northern Uganda. Now the LRA has moved north and is terrorizing towns in south Sudan, bringing violent conflict to a region only recently stabilized under the Sudan Comprehensive Peace Agreement of 2005. Despite the violence and strife the

militias bring, the Acholi and other people groups practice forgiveness and reconciliation rather than punishing militia members who choose to return to society.

For much of the time during the second civil war in Sudan, fought from 1983 to 2005 (conflict still continues in some areas), scholarly study of the evolution of religious climate in South Sudan has been largely neglected, while spiritual-political movements such as the LRA in nearby Uganda received press coverage and attention in literature. I will have the opportunity to observe to what extent traditional beliefs combine with Christianity in Sudanese churches, as well as work with a translator to interview the people in the Mundri area, who are mostly Moru. I want to learn to what extent religious beliefs drove people to join the Sudan Peoples Liberation Army to fight against the north in the civil war, how beliefs shape attitudes toward threats from the LRA and other militias, and how they affect views of reconciliation between the Islamic North and Christian-Animist South.

During my internship, I will be working with the Episcopal Church of Sudan, the entity that has administered education in the state of West Equatoria since British colonial occupation. The internship is mainly to give me experience with education in the developing world, and is designed to give me time to conduct field research on religion, social practices, health, or education. If it is deemed safe, I will have the opportunity to travel around the Mundri area to conduct interviews in nearby towns that have been attacked by the LRA in recent months. I will also interview the African Bishop of the Episcopal Church in Mundri and American Missionaries about their theological views on the combination of traditional religious elements with Christianity so I can pursue a well-rounded view of the issue from multiple angles.