



# Making African Christianity: Africans Reimagining Their Faith in Colonial South Africa

By Robert J. Houle

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Robert J. Houle examines the history of faith among colonial Zulu Christians (known as amaKholwa,) in what would become South Africa, arguing that Africans successfully naturalized Christianity. Houle believes that before the religion could take hold, several aspects of Christianity needed to be "translated" to fill critical gaps between existing African beliefs and Christian tradition. This dual identity was difficult to reconcile through much of Zulu Christian history, but ultimately transformed both the Zulu Christians and their adopted faith.

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**Making African Christianity: Africans Reimagining Their Faith in Colonial South Africa** By Robert J. Houle **Bibliography**

- Sales Rank: #2106250 in Books
- Published on: 2013-08-23
- Released on: 2013-08-23
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 8.91" h x 1.03" w x 6.26" l, 1.19 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 354 pages



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### Editorial Review

#### Review

Historian Houle (Fairleigh Dickinson Univ.) explores the process by which Zulu congregants of the American Zulu Mission (AZM) in Britain's Southern African Natal Colony in the late 19th and early 20th centuries "naturalized" Christianity and made it a local religion. The stripping away of the US cultural traits of the AZM—a Congregationalist mission affiliated with the American Board of Commissioners—was achieved, ironically, via a characteristically US tool for conversion: the revival meeting. Zulu emotionalism made white missionaries uncomfortable, but like colonizers everywhere, they eventually conceded that while they could deliver the message, they could not control its reception and application. Underlying Houle's analysis is his desire to explain why a majority of Zulu converts stayed with the AZM rather than joining African Independent Churches that would allow them greater freedom of religious expression. To answer, Houle moves away from the political and economic explanations offered by Jean and John Comaroff, Elizabeth Elbourne, Paul Landau, and J. D. Y. Peel, and follows Benedict Carton by explaining how Zulu converts transformed AZM theology from within by incorporating Zulu beliefs. This transformation, Houle argues, helped ensure the survival of Christianity in rural Southern Africa. **Summing Up:** Recommended. Upper-division undergraduates and above. (*CHOICE*)

#### About the Author

**Robert J. Houle** is associate professor of history at Fairleigh Dickinson University.

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