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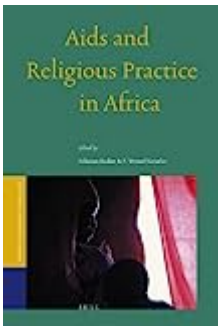

Felicitas Becker, Wenzel Geissler, eds. *Aids and Religious Practice in Africa.* Leiden: Brill, 2009. vi + 404 pp. $184.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-90-04-16400-0.

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Review: "Religion, AIDS, and the Negotiation of "Modernity" "

This volume of collected essays provides needed perspective on the diversity of ways that individual Africans and their religious communities of choice understand and cope with HIV/AIDS. Consisting of twelve chapters, an introduction by the editors, and a brief conclusion by John Lonsdale, the collective emphasis of the book is on how discourses concerning AIDS within religious communities in East and southern Africa (with one outlying chapter on West Africa) have become arenas through which Africans are negotiating new definitions of the âselfâ in the context of âmodernity,â a term only nebulously defined throughout the text. Through case studies involving Christian and Muslim communities, the authors illustrate, however, that religious discourses on AIDS are not strictly reactionary: they do not necessarily work against the âmodernizationâ project or dissociate from it. Rather these communities and the individuals within them are striving mightily to make sense of the very tangible negative effects, in particular AIDS, that have accompanied âmodernityâ in African settings, and to forge new paths for themselves in what are often rapidly changing and, in some cases, disintegrating social structures.

For many Africans, AIDS is understood not simply as a biomedical phenomenon preventable by practicing safe sex and treatable with anti-retroviral therapy (ART), as it is so often presented by governmental and international aid organizations, but as one aspect of a much more broadly recognized spectrum of social decay that has been afflicting African societies at least since the onset of European colonial rule more than one hundred years ago. The widespread poverty, underdevelopment, poor governance, and overall weakening of âtraditionalâ social structures that have accompanied African societiesâ resulting encounter with âmodernityâ are often seen as part and parcel of the AIDS epidemic. The âdownward spiralâ that has occurred as these social ills exacerbate each other begs for holistic explanations and proactive agendas beyond those that the Western, secular worldview can provide.

Several chapters note the effects that seeing AIDS

within a larger pattern of social decline has had on the ways that Christian communities and individuals understand AIDS. Heike Behrend illustrates the extent to which these conditions of generalized decline and widespread death have led to a resurgence in beliefs in the presence of cannibal witches in western Uganda. The Catholic Church has provided some assistance to anti-witchcraft movements in the area. Ruth Prince shows in her chapter on widow inheritance practices among the Luo that the general social and economic decline associated with âmodernityâ has sparked widespread debate in western Kenya about the cause of AIDS. âTraditionalistsâ argue that God has brought AIDS to punish the Luo for abandoning the old ways, notably the practice of widow inheritance (*tero*) whereby a widow must sleep with another man in order to cleanse her household of the ritual uncleanliness of her husbandâs death. âSavedâ Luo women who have converted into Pentecostal Christianity, however, argue that such practices as tero contribute to the spread of HIV. Catrine Christiansenâs chapter on widows in Uganda makes a similar observation and adds that the âSavedâ status of born-again Christian widows makes them âbrides of Christâ who are not required to engage in such practices. Such a religious stance allows widows to protect themselves from the risk of AIDS and to forge some independence from kinship networks, but only in the context of what amounts to a pledge of abstinence.

Similar constructions of AIDS occur in Muslim contexts. Nadine Beckham portrays attitudes toward AIDS in Zanzibar as directly linked to non-Muslim influences, particularly immigration and political hegemony from mainland Tanzania in conjunction with the rise of a Western-oriented tourist industry. These influences have brought a decline in adherence to âtraditionalâ Islamic mores in Zanzibar, which has caused God to bring AIDS as a punishment. Felicitas Beckerâs chapter makes the same linkages between AIDS, âoutsiders,â and Godâs wrath in Muslim communities in mainland Tanzania, adding that many here are particularly skeptical of official, scientific explanations of the causes of AIDS given that science, technology, and the state have historically caused more harm than good when taken together, as in the failed âvillagizationâ schemes of the 1970s. This has led some Muslim Tanzanians to reject ART, even when available, out of a belief that it might actually make them sicker.

Although most religious communities tend to explain AIDS within this larger climate of general social decline, the authors make clear that religious responses to AIDS should not be generalized. Negotiations between âtraditionalâ and âmodernâ explanations of AIDS cause fractures and fissures both within and between religious communities that make it impossible to define the âreligiousâ response to AIDS in uniform terms. Beckman notes that many Muslims choose to see their HIV positive status not as a curse from God, but rather as a trial: a challenge to be coped with and possibly overcome. Jonas Svenson lays out the tensions in Islamic education circles in Kisumu, Kenya, about how to handle the subjects of fornication and condom usage in relation to AIDS prevention measures. Most Muslims recognize fornication as a sin, but many realize that it is a sin they will likely commit. Condoms are seen as promoting fornication, and are therefore not acceptable to many Muslims, but some teachers are beginning to accept the use of condoms within marriage. Still others are beginning to suggest that their use is acceptable for fornication as well, the argument being that if sex outside marriage is always a sin, then using a condom does not make it more of a sin.

Christian communities are also negotiating religious with âtraditionalâ and âmodernâ explanations of AIDS. Hansjorg Dilger discusses the interplay between these belief systems in a particular Neo-Pentecostal church in Dar es Salaam. Faith healers within the church make strong linkages between destructive spirits (*pepo*) that can infect the body in the form of HIV or other viruses biomedically defined. This mixing of indigenous conceptions of illness with Christian faith healing is also noted in Isak Niehausâs chapter on the Zionist church in South Africa. Niehausâs main point, however, is to draw connections between AIDS and leprosy, which frames Zionist understanding of AIDS both from a biblical perspective and a historical one. AIDS patients are seen in this context as highly contaminating and occupying a zone between life and death, leading to high levels of witchcraft and zombie imagery.

While religious communities are increasingly being seen as offering a necessary and valuable critique of lackluster national and international responses to the AIDS crisis, several chapters in this book point out the caveats associated with Christian and Muslim approaches to AIDS. Jo Sadgroveâs contribution on transactional sexual relationships among university students in Uganda discusses how many Pentecostal women engage in âdetoothingâ relationships with older, more financially secure men whereby sex or the prospect of future sex is traded for the material needs that are necessary to support themselves through school. At the same time, however, they maintain a born-again status within the church

that is based in part on a pledge of abstinence. Such circumstances force women who enjoy the community of the church and the social marker that âsavedâ status represents to keep their sexual activities secret for fear of attracting charges of hypocrisy. Rijk van Dijkâs chapter makes clear the âsocial distancingâ that Pentecostal churches engender with non-Pentecostals in Botswana through discussion of Pentecostal hair salon ownersâ ambivalence about providing their non-Pentecostal employees rubber gloves to protect themselves when working on clients.

The final two chapters focus on the efforts of religious communities to provide AIDS counseling to their congregations. Marian Burchardtâs chapter discusses the synergy that exists between Pentecostal notions of breaking with the past and starting life anew with the need of HIV counselors to help patients to cope with the life-changing nature of their illness. Vinh-Kim Nguyen chronicles the transition of voluntary counseling and testing services in West African settings from the struggle to get people to discuss openly their experiences with HIV/AIDS toward helping patients to access ARTs and to manage their treatment regimes as medications have become more available, illustrating again the positive side of religious community as an outlet for much needed services.

Lonsdaleâs conclusion makes some historical comparisons between the effects of the AIDS pandemic on the African continent today and the widespread famines that brought such difficult circumstances for much of East and southern Africa in the late nineteenth century, noting the prospects for a ârepoliticizationâ of African communities around the issue of AIDS and through religious organizations. Lonsdaleâs hope for this repoliticization is tempered, however, by recognition of the deepening and variegated fissures emanating in many African societies as the consequences of the AIDS pandemic become ever more sharply felt.

Readers may find various shortcomings in this book, as with all edited collections, depending on the perspective taken. Scholars of religion may find perturbing the editors' squeamishness about providing a definition of âreligionâ and, possibly as a result, limiting the scope of the book only to perspectives from Christian and Muslim communities. Those reading from a public health perspective may be disappointed in the somewhat tangential role that AIDS itself plays in many of the chapters that focus so much on seeing AIDS as part of the larger crisis of âmodernity.â Those interested in gender and sexuality will be pleased with the prominent role that female sexuality, gender roles, and empowerment play in many of the chapters. However, male sexuality is at best an implicit theme in this book and all sexual relations are discussed exclusively in terms of heterosexuality. Those with a strong background in the anthropology of AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa will likely find little new conceptually in these chapters. However, the case studies are illuminating and effective. An audience with little background on African perceptions and responses to AIDS will likely find that, taken together, this collection provides an alternative perspective on AIDS as a problem more encompassing than simply a syndrome brought on by a viral infection. This is a perspective that large numbers of Africans themselves take, although by no means uniformly, and one that is no doubt extremely relevant, if not central, to any long-term efforts to combat, control, or cope with AIDS in Africa.

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