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Angelique Harris

Marquette University, angelique.harris@marquette.edu

Marquette University

e-Publications@Marquette

Social and Cultural Sciences Faculty Research and Publications/Department of Social and Cultural Sciences

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Review of *Religion and AIDS in Africa*

Angelique Harris

Department of Social and Cultural Sciences, Marquette University, Milwaukee WI

Jenny Trinitapoli and Alexander Weinreb's *Religion and AIDS in Africa* provides the reader with a riveting account of the relationship between religion and HIV/AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). This text is perhaps the most comprehensive account of the influence that religion has on understandings and responses to HIV/AIDS in this region of the world. There is nowhere else on this planet that has been as devastated by HIV/AIDS than SSA, and Trinitapoli and Weinreb begin their book with a discussion of this impact. Rates of HIV/AIDS have increased, substantially, in SSA since 1990. However, Trinitapoli and Weinreb are quick to note that the rates of HIV/AIDS vary across the continent. For example, countries with very large Muslim populations, such as Egypt and Morocco have very low rates of HIV infection, but in countries such as Swaziland, Botswana, and Lesotho the adult estimated HIV prevalence rate in these nations is well over 20 percent. In order to explain these disparities, the authors state, "We became convinced that local responses to AIDS in this part of the world are animated by the deeply embedded nature of religious life" (p. 4)—in essence, they argue, one cannot adequately study AIDS in Africa without studying religion in Africa, and they begin the text with a discussion of the religious patterns found throughout the continent.

Trinitapoli and Weinreb write that Africa is perhaps "the most religious place on Earth" (p. 5). Not only do people throughout the continent report high levels of religious affiliation, they also report high

levels of participation in religious beliefs and traditions. As such, religion has a major impact on the lives of a vast majority of individuals in Africa. Consequently, the authors argue, it makes sense that religious beliefs would heavily influence responses to HIV/AIDS in Africa, in SSA in particular. They explain, "Given the centrality of religious life in Africa, it is no surprise that religion, through its institutions, and the free-flowing discourse it inspires, affects how people in [SSA] perceive AIDS, avoid AIDS, and mitigate its effects within their families and communities" (p. 187). Trinitapoli and Weinreb utilize a longitudinal mixed methods approach consisting of what they refer to as "semi-ethnographic" (p. 7) research, surveys, interviews, focus groups, and analysis of scripture and even sermons, along with an extensive review of the literature on this topic. Receiving funding from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, the authors "piggyback on an existing research project" (p. 7) called the Malawi Diffusion and Ideation Change Project that examines the small eastern African nation of Malawi, and the authors focused most of their efforts on that nation. Trinitapoli and Weinreb also visited other African nations, such as Mozambique, South Africa, and Ghana and examined secondary data on religious beliefs from scores of other African nations. So, although this text primarily examines religion and AIDS in Malawi, this text can be used to examine AIDS and religion across SSA.

The layout of this text is well organized and consists of 10 chapters within four parts, not including an introductory and concluding chapter. "Part One: The Basics," consists of an overview of HIV/AIDS and discusses the religious patterns that exist throughout SSA. The second part of the book examines how religion influences the ways in which AIDS, as an epidemic, is understood and how this influences the production and interpretation of HIV/AIDS related knowledge. "Part Three: Preventing HIV" discusses the influence that religion has on HIV prevention strategies. The fourth part of the text explores how different religious institutions have responded to HIV/AIDS.

Beyond providing an enormous amount of statistics concerning religion and AIDS in Africa, the authors do a wonderful job of highlighting the cultural differences between SSA and Western nations concerning such topics as religious beliefs, community involvement, the role of women in religious institutions and communities. Importantly, Trinitapoli and Weinreb explain why the rates are higher in SSA nations than in other nations and discuss the particular nuances concerning HIV/AIDS and how they vary based on religion, village, region, et cetera. For example, the authors explain that for many in different African nations, HIV/AIDS is not necessarily an immediate threat. People in many of these nations regularly experience severe poverty, civil wars, and other more dire and immediate life threatening issues than HIV/AIDS, an illness that, for many people, may take years to progress. Additionally, the authors do a great job of noting that there are a variety of cultural differences that influence HIV/AIDS education and intervention discourse.

Trinitapoli and Weinreb discuss in great detail the HIV prevention campaign known as ABC, which stands for "Abstain, Be faithful, use Condoms" (p. 85) and how religious institutions and non-profit organizations work to promote this action. Just as in Western nations, abstinence for many within SSA is difficult to maintain. With historically younger ages of first marriage than found in Western nations, particularly among women, long-term abstinence was not common among young adults; however, as the age of first marriage increases, encouraging abstinence has become a new challenge. Additionally, the authors discuss how the monotony of daily village life is often dull and the temptation for an extramarital affair is often high, possibly making fidelity difficult. In their discussion of condom use, Trinitapoli and Weinreb explain that most religious leaders they have come into contact with, including

Catholic priests, not only openly promoted condom use as a form of HIV prevention (when an individual could not adhere to the “A” and “B”), they also often provided condoms to parishioners.

Religion and AIDS in Africa is well written, researched, and, although it is quite a dense book that contains numerous charts and graphs that may be intimidating to undergraduate students, the text is still quite approachable and would be a great fit for a course on the sociology of HIV/AIDS or even religion. Trinitapoli and Weinreb provide a clear and straight forward text that contains not only an incredible amount of statistics and information concerning HIV/AIDS in SSA, but also informs us of the role that religion has had in this discourse, and within communities in cultures.