

Islam and AIDS: Between Scorn, Pity and Justice

By Farid Esack and Sarah Chiddy (eds). Oxford: Oneworld. 256 pp. 2009. ISBN 978-1-85168-633-9.

Farid Esack and Sarah Chiddy, the co-editors of *Islam and AIDS*, underlined the fact that HIV and AIDS is a pandemic that is not out there but that, 'It is (here) with us!' They argued that the pandemic's persistent prevalence among Muslims is a fact that no one can afford to ignore. The editors drew upon Ersilia Francesca's 'AIDS in Contemporary Islamic Literature' survey (Naples 2002), which observed that voices such as Al-Azhar University condemned AIDS as a disease and opined that it is only common among homosexuals. These conservative voices argued that since homosexuals overstepped God's boundaries they 'deserve to die!' The traditional Muslims' judgmental stance and negative attitude towards the pandemic have paradoxically been echoed by Muslim social scientists such as Malik Badri. Despite the depressing statements that conformists made, there are others who have injected hope into the lives of PLWHIV. They have pursued 'a theology of compassion' approach which demands everyone to act justly towards whosoever has been afflicted and affected. Though relatively small in number, these Muslim groups have successfully intervened in stemming the tide. During a short space of time they brought about qualitative changes in the affected ones' lives and as a consequence gradually influenced the thinking and attitudes of (some of) the traditionalists.

Abdulaziz Sachedina posed the question whether the suffering that human beings face has been 'Afflicted by God?' (pp.13 - 27) in the opening chapter. In response Sachedina assessed the notions of 'suffering' in the two Muslim primary sources, and pointed out how it was interpreted by both Sunni and Shi'ite theologians. Sachedina's evaluation showed that Muslim theologians disagreed among themselves and this resulted in two contradictory perspectives on suffering; the first is 'determinist theodicy' and second is 'free-will theodicy'. While the latter is tied to divine justice and human agency, the former concurs with the view that 'suffering is part of God's plan for the betterment of humanity' (p.24).

Malik Badri, a determinist, demonstrated in 'The Aids Crises: (from) an Islamic Perspective' (pp.28 - 42) chapter that AIDS is a sign of divine justice towards homosexuals and others who disobeyed God's limits; and he further noted that the only remedy for everyone is to adhere to Islamic values. Although one has no qualms with Badri's suggestion, one cannot fully endorse his determinist philosophy. It is quite strange that despite the overwhelming evidence regarding how HIV has been transmitted, he remained unmoved more than 10 years after he scripted *The Aids Crises: An Islamic Socio-Cultural Perspective* (Kuala Lumpur 1997). Sindre Bangstad, who researched HIV and AIDS among Cape Muslims, severely critiqued Badri in his 'Aids and the Wrath of God' (pp.43 - 58) by literally flouting Badri on many counts.

Nabilah Siddiquee critiqued one of the oft-quoted prophetic statements recorded in Ibn Majah's *Sunan* in her 'When Fahisha becomes widespread: AIDS and the Ibn Majah Hadith' chapter (pp.59 - 75). Siddiquee correctly called into question the

conservative account of the prophetic statement and argued that the interpretation given by the theologians is not only highly problematic but also unjust to the text as well to the people. She emphasised that when adopting an alternative reading of the statement, then it may be viewed as '...a serious defense of the rights of the underprivileged, emphasizing the social responsibilities of all.' Siddiquee's analysis somewhat ties in with Muhammad Hashim Kamali's ideas; the latter pondered over the relationship between 'The Shariah and AIDS: (and advocated) Towards a Theology of Compassion' (pp.76 - 87); a theology mooted by Esack, the co-founder of the Cape Town-based 'Positive Muslims'. Kamali carefully reflected on the general Shari'ah principles to develop a Muslim perspective towards this pandemic. He emphasised, among others, the concern for the protection of basic human values, and the mustering of communal resources to prevent individuals from being stigmatised.

Since women and men have been differently affected by the pandemic, Clara Koh's 'Gender, Justice, Islam and AIDS' (pp.88 - 104) campaigned for a Muslim feminist approach to bring about gender justice in an unequal environment and for the adoption of a more holistic approach that takes into account multiple strands of structural violence and Marina Mahathir's 'Fatal Confluences? Islam, Gender, and AIDS in Malaysia' (pp.105 - 118) explored gender relations in Muslim societies. Apart from having discussed 'Islam and Gender' on the one hand, and 'Gender and HIV/AIDS' on the other, Mahathir remarked on the institutions of marriage and women's vulnerability to the HIV.

While Trad Godsey analysed the Muslim male and the construction of masculinity with regards to AIDS in 'The Muslim Man and AIDS: Negotiating Spaces for New Conceptualizations of Modernity' (pp.119 - 136), Scott S Kugle and Sarah Chiddy addressed the issue of 'AIDS, Muslims and Homosexuality' (pp.137 - 153). They acknowledged that they ventured into a terrain that has been and continues to be an extremely difficult issue to broach in Muslim societies; and after they examined the Muslim legal sources, they (controversially) suggested 'that the injunctions against same-sex behavior that can be found in the Islamic texts and rulings base themselves on an understanding of sexual acts, not orientation' (p. 140). In spite of logically setting out their arguments and clarifying the disconnection between HIV and homosexuality, it is unlikely that traditional Muslims will be swayed by their explanations. On a different but related topic Kate Long commented 'On Sex, Sin and Silence: An Islamic Theology of Storytelling for AIDS Awareness' (pp.154 - 168) in which she convincingly argued how the performative arts demystifies through storytelling many aspects related to HIV.

The common thread between Caitlin Y Buysse's 'The Quran, Poverty, and AIDS' (pp.169 - 185) and Kabir S Bavikatte's 'Muslims, AIDS, and Justice: Beyond Personal Indictment' (pp.186 - 195) is the underlying concern for the application of economic justice. Buysse highlighted the significance of socio-economic justice as

spelt out in the Quran and discussed the relationship between charity and HIV. Bavikatte, like Koh, argued that structural violence has been one of the contributing factors that inflicted upon and affected women's vulnerability to HIV; he maintained that this factor and others (e.g. inequality and lack of resources) should be given attention and pointed out that one should not overlook the extent to which neoliberal policies have influenced the pandemic's transmission. Chris Byrnes underscored the problems associated with 'Injecting Drug Use HIV, and AIDS in the Muslim World' (pp.196 - 210), and Laura McTighe addressed 'HIV, Addiction, and Justice: Towards a Quranic Theology of Liberation' (pp.211 - 227). Byrnes confirmed that Muslim communities received adequate attention despite the negative attitude encountered in Muslim nation-states where some Muslim governments have put in place structures to deal with it. McTighe persuasively proposed for a Quranic theology of liberation and identified key concepts

for such a theology. Kecia Ali summed up the 14 contributions in her afterword: 'Ideals, Realities, and Islam: Thoughts on the AIDS Pandemic' (pp.228 - 235). On the whole, each contributor explored and stimulated the debate around HIV among Muslims.

The volume, which is essential reading for all social scientists, filled an important gap in the field and it reminded religious communities about the importance of adopting a positive rather than a negative mind-set in dealing with this vicious pandemic; and it provided ample reasons why Muslims should pursue 'a theology of compassion' approach that should be extended to everyone.

Muhammed Haron
University of Botswana

Full text version of
S A H A R A J
Available online at
www.sahara.org.za