

## **Book Review: *Reflecting Theologically on Aids***

**Title:** *Reflecting Theologically on Aids: A Global Challenge*

**Publisher:** SCM Press, London, 2007.

**Author:** Robin Gill, Editor.

The data for infection by HIV/Aids is overwhelming: forty million infected, nearly 30 million dead and a possible five million new cases each year. How to move beyond denial, despair to address this mind-numbing problem? Any effort must harness the expertise of medical professionals, researchers, international and political groups. It must also include ethicists and theologians, hence the role of this book edited by Robin Gill.

Some of the most important theological responses to HIV/AIDS are emerging from Southern Africa, South America and India. This collection of essay is representative of this movement but also includes the work of North Atlantic scholars. The book originated from a Theological Workshop organized by UNAIDS at Windhoek, Namibia in December 2003. It gathers together talks given at that Workshop and relevant articles from a range of theological journals.

The book opens with the Windhoek Report 'HIV- and AIDS-related stigma: a framework for theological reflection.' There follows a series of complementary theological discussions from within the Catholic and other Christian traditions. There is a strong presence of Catholic theologians. This is perhaps an indicator that the Catholic Church, despite criticisms from secular agencies, has responded to the challenge of HIV/AIDS more energetically than most other Christian bodies through, for instance, *Caritas Internationalis*.

We find in this collection a rich and varied selection from Catholic scholars such as Enda McDonagh, Robert Vitillo, Margaret Farley, Gareth Moore, Lisa Sowle Cahill and James Keenan SJ and Protestant authors such as Musa Dube, Denise Ackermann, Gunther Wittenberg. The book can be seen under three

headings. The first begins with the pastoral and human challenges of HIV/Aids (Vitillo), Scriptural perspectives [e.g., Jesus, prophecy, leprosy – Dube and Gill], its impact on Theology and theological education (McDonagh and Ackermann), ethical issues around Responsibility (Charles Ryan), the Church, homosexuality and AIDS – Moore).

The second groups of topics centre on theological activism in three areas; the Yale Divinity School Women's initiative on Aids (Farley); Counselling strategies for those with HIV/Aids in the light of the Book of Job (Wittenberg); social activism of the Church instanced in the campaign to make antiretroviral drugs available and affordable in South Africa (Cahill).

The third and final area is the clash between traditional Catholic (and Evangelical Protestant) teaching on contraception and the use of barrier methods in limiting HIV/AIDS infection. On this there are two fine discussions on AIDS prevention and the lesser good (Leonard Martin) and on a casuistry of accommodation (Keenan).

This is an excellent and very timely collection of articles. It brings together some of the best current theological and ethical thinking on HIV/AIDS emerging from the African and Anglo-American Christian communities. It is consistent in the quality of its content while offering complementary perspectives. The style and format is accessible and clear. There are helpful Indices of Names and Subjects and of Biblical References.

While there is valuable information in this book, it presents many insights and much wisdom. We are reminded that we can protect existing Christian principles while engaging new problems in a creative and responsible way. Given the strong Catholic presence in the book, Keenan is correct in noting that the 'Catholic tradition is a supple and balanced legacy that we need to recognize,

appreciate and utilize' (201). Citing Roger Burggraeve on the final page, Keenan aptly sums up the Christian conviction shared by all contributors to this book:

In the Incarnation Jesus gave to the Church the possibility of practising mercy. This virtue, associated with being neighbourly to those suffering from illness and shame, ought to and does urge us to enter now into the chaos of AIDS.

**Reviewer:** Tom Ryan SM, Adjunct Lecturer at the Australian Catholic University, and Visiting Fellow at Griffith University, Brisbane.