
The cover of this well researched and well written PhD thesis highlights what the reader may miss as its main theme. A young man stealthily looking aside strides across a page full of very threatening texts. Besides the rather imposing title and subtitle, there is a signboard showing God’s piercing eye stating that He may forgive, but AIDS does not. The crisis of masculine identity — a concern for politicians worldwide — forms the background of this church-sponsored analysis of how Christianity may help reshape manhood on the African continent, where the reckless sexual behaviour of men is deemed to cause the spread of AIDS affecting vulnerable women. Only, the author enters from the opposite angle, working skillfully toward recognition of this pastoral concern that appears only in the closing pages. The question how to create a positively constructed new ideal of manhood ripens through a clear build-up of this book that eventually helps the reader to value the inverted commas in the title. As in a thriller, the intent of a curtailing (‘cutting’) emasculation dominates most of the book that sets out with the massive verdict of irresponsible male behaviour as main cause of the epidemic and the challenge to the churches to help curtail macho ideals.

After posing the theme in rather more subtle terms, the author gives a well-sourced chapter on recent African theology that — spurred on by feminist voices in all mainline churches — critiques patriarchal trends stemming from local traditions that became dominant forces in Christianity, due to the link between divine authority and the male gender. Stressing that gender is a construct rather than a natural given these authors plead for a critical analysis of the preached message in view of the devastating epidemic to which self-imposing males contribute. The revolutionary value of this theological novelty is stressed, but Van Klinken rightly questions the sloppy concept of ‘patriarchy’, as he prefers: hegemonic masculinity. Indeed, anthropologists have asked whether the decried complex is of African or exogenous origin. The Ghanaian Mary Odoyuye is quoted as prime source of the term ‘patriarchy’ (literally: father’s rule); but how is one to understand it, if in her matrilineal setting a man wields authority over sons, who belong to their mother’s clan? And what is one to say of such patrilineal groups where the word ‘male’ stands for anything useless, compared to a useful version of it being called ‘female’? Do those theologians wilfully ignore the import of the Western nuclear family, the money economy and the nation state as major factors having constructed the present ideals of masculinity?

Leaving these questions to the theologians, the book proceeds to its core section, which is an empirical study of two Christian communities in Zambia, engaged in reconstructing a ‘manhood’ that responds to the challenge of the HIV disaster. The Catholic Regiment Parish and the Pentecostal Northmead Assembly of God (NAOG) are both aware of the need to raise the men’s awareness of their responsibilities in the matter and address their ‘masculinity’ in religious terms. Being both rather middle-class, the two communities operate from different theological perspectives. The Pentecostals stress the need for individual conversion and being ‘born again’, while the Catholics work within the communal perspective, marked
by the ideal of ‘family of God’. The latter stress the structural importance of the men’s behaviour, while the former highlight the individual challenged by God’s word. The Catholics address men via a special organisation called St. Joachim’s, that places the Lord’s grandfather, Joachim, as an example of good male behaviour. It appears that both churches address the same issues of sexual discipline, respect of women, spirituality and leadership. The NAOG-founder Rev. Banda is very outspoken, even in (inter)national context, and given adequate credit for tackling this thorny issue.

A fourth chapter, then, compares the messages of these churches to the prophetic voice of the theologians. The former’s Biblically motivated, essentialist message tends to stress God’s creative will that established the complementary of sexes with clear leadership responsibility for men, which is to be given a responsible and respectful enactment. Despite a difference in accent the churches agree on this view, but are lambasted by the theologians who stress utter gender equality and reject hetero-normativity. Careful, as an outsider, not to step into this local debate, Van Klinken nonetheless shows how the various ideals of the theologians return in the churches’ discourse. This allows him to attempt to develop a vision of his own, relying on two feminist authors: the Egyptian anthropologist, Saba Mahmood, and the American theologian Margareth Kamitsuka. Mahmood stresses the notion of agency where each person, male or female, can and should play his or her own creative role. Kamitsuka points out that the idea of a powerless femininity is a travesty of reality.

Stopping at this point, the author opens up a debate that he is eager to leave with the Africans, who might resort to numerous anthropological studies, not just the female tools to cut male dominance to size. If any tradition is replete with gender-balancing tools, as I indicated above, the African is. What if masculinity is emblemized by a chief, who is publicly debunked as dirt or as the mightiest of all witches? And as to instructing the young men in a religious men’s organisation called St. Joachim, they might resort to the time-proven African idea of alternate generations, where grandfathers coach their grandsons. Or does theology prevent Christians from believing that Jesus learned anything from his grandfather? The grandfather would no doubt be more sensitive to what Van Klinken finally mentions as his concern, not so much to ‘cut to size’, but to open up creative masculine roles. After all, the African meaning of circumcision is not ‘cutting off the excessive masculinity’, but rather cutting off that part of the opposite sex which remained after passing from the un-gendered life with the ancestors to the gendered life on earth. At a time, when the concern about underperforming young men preoccupies politicians, because digitalisation favours feminine skills to the extent that it drives many a young man into an unproductive virtual world without perspective, there is every reason to believe that Africa harbours an anthropological laboratory with stimulating options. As for the theologians, they might benefit from African mythology to explain why a second sex was created at all. Indeed, if 70% of life on earth procreate by mere partition, why this male sex, unable to reproduce life and forced to invent a role for himself as the head of a family, after the female solicited a help in caring for her babies that got born ever more immaturely due to neoteny. Understandably, Van Klinken was not in a position to ask that question to the congregations, who are wrestling with a dangerous gender imbalance, caused mainly by Western