Biographies in Times of Crisis:

*Exploring Religious Narratives of AIDS in Africa and the African Diaspora*

International Conference, Groningen, the Netherlands

13, 14 and 15 December 2012

Call for papers for a conference hosted by the Religion, Identity and Memory Research Group, Faculty of Religious Studies, University of Groningen & the International Research Network on AIDS and Religion in Africa (IRNARA)

**Convenors:**
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**Introduction**
The contemporary history of AIDS in Africa demonstrates how, over the course of a few decades, the lives of people and institutions have been drawn into the social trajectory of the disease. It has not merely reshaped the lives of those directly affected and their families, peers and friends but has also informed changes in certain institutions in African
societies. Personal and institutional biographies have been reformulated as the epidemic has taken its course and personal meanings of religion have changed to cope with (the consequences of) HIV/AIDS. In addition, religious institutions have become part of the fight against the pandemic. In the programmes set up for treatment, care and awareness, new ideas concerning the disciplining of personal, social and institutional behaviour have emerged.

Focus
The role of religion in personal and institutional biographies of AIDS needs to be explored in more detail. At a personal level, more insight is required into how religion provides people with narrative models to respond to crises. Religio-biographies (Jacobson 2006) have been seen to play a role in meaning making and coping with HIV/AIDS in many African societies. However there are questions about when, how and for what reasons people use religious narrative models in shaping their responses to HIV/AIDS. How do religious narrative models play a role in coping with HIV/AIDS and how do they influence biographical choices regarding intimacy, sexuality, reproduction and relationships?

Personal and institutional biographies intersect and influence each other in responses to HIV/AIDS in Africa. For example, people living with HIV/AIDS are increasingly becoming involved in activist and institutional responses to HIV/AIDS. More insight into this interrelationship is necessary. How are religio-biographies of professionals in churches influencing organizational policies and counselling practices? And how are (religious) institutions seeking to influence or change religio-biographies on HIV and/or the epidemic? Memorial rituals and the (re-)writing of memory narratives are examples of how the histories of people dying from AIDS can be retained posthumously. Furthermore, personal and institutional biographies of religion and HIV/AIDS have become intertwined in a powerful discourse with wide ramifications for African public domains, healthcare and global/international support.

Deeper insight into the complex entanglement of discipline and agency is necessary for a better understanding of the role of religion in personal and institutional biographies of HIV/AIDS and how these influence each other. In the process, particular forms and styles of ‘narrative disciplining’ take place. People have ‘learned’ how to phrase the story of their (AIDS-affected) lives, how to formulate their behavioural choices and options, and how to respond to the requirements that a range of institutions are promoting in an attempt to curtail the epidemic. Some of these narratives and life histories are becoming well known worldwide. As these stories have become part of international fund-raising, policy-making and decision-taking, they have turned some of the people affected with AIDS into so-called ‘AIDS celebrities’. At the same time, biographies also signal agency on the part of individuals and institutions and provide a space to demonstrate how, in the course of engagements with AIDS, resistance can emerge under certain circumstances and for particular reasons. Narrativity can thus also be seen as a form of resistance and contestation. In the light of recent discussions on agency and its conception in a secular, liberal framework (Mahmood 2005), agency and the agential power in religious self-narratives and life-story telling in the context of HIV/AIDS should be critically assessed.
The biographies of persons and institutions should not be perceived solely as formalized narratives highlighting the success of disciplining modes in the areas of sexuality, reproduction and relationships. Nor should agency be seen only in terms of resistance to certain forms of disciplining. As self-narratives have become a part of the personal and institutional responses to HIV/AIDS, for example in the counselling process, the agentic power in narrativity itself needs further analysis. This conference proposes exploring personal and institutional biographies in terms of their power (over individual and institutional lives), the ideologies and moralities they espouse, and the practices through which they are formulated.

Sub-themes and questions
This conference aims to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the power, practices and ideologies that mark the (re)formulation of biographies in times of crisis. It aspires to do so by investigating the relationship between HIV/AIDS and religion in Africa through biography, life history and self-narratives. A leading question in this respect is how personal and institutional biographies become intertwined and how this leads to new configurations of power, ideology and practice where the histories of people and their institutions are concerned.

The conference invites papers that address the following issues:

1. Understanding AIDS through biographies
How does an analysis of biographies, life histories and self-narratives contribute to a better understanding of the AIDS epidemic and religious engagement with the disease? How does a biographic approach allow a better understanding of how organizational policies and programmes shape and are shaped by personal biographies? How do (religious) institutions (churches, FBOs, NGOs, leaders, spokespeople) position themselves through narratives and how does this positioning impact on people’s perceptions of and experiences with AIDS? How do the dynamics between personal and institutional biographies impact on one another? How does this highlight the manner in which narrativity can be explored as disciplining or agentive?

2. Continuity and crisis in the rewriting of narratives of the self
How is the suffering and the ruptures that HIV/AIDS entail expressed in individual and collective biographies? How can the crisis that HIV/AIDS provokes in life courses and life histories be understood in the perspective of agency, relations, coping and discipline? How do personal biographies rewrite subjectivity in the form of self-narrativity, self-responsibility and decision-making when faced with crisis? This can include experiences of suffering and the death of friends and relatives, and the disruption of social and reproductive relations. How do biographies that suggest taking one’s life course in one’s own hands relate to or contest socio-religious involvement with the disease? Do self-narratives provide critical reflections of one’s past life and future re-orientations that are associated with HIV/AIDS?
3. Socio-religious biographies of the self and their contestation
How do religio-biographies emerge? And how do religio-biographies of HIV/AIDS influence HIV/AIDS education, counselling and pastoral relations between the ‘sender’ and the ‘receiver’? Where do these religio-biographies stand in relation to other forms of narrativity? Is there a battle of biographies that indicates choices that persons and institutions have to make consciously and convincingly in order to be assured of a particular representation of themselves in Africa’s public domain?

4. Memory, voice and silence in embodied biographies
What is the role of biography and life history in the way societies remember in the context of crisis? How is HIV/AIDS embodied in memory? How do memory narratives contribute to rewriting the lives of those with HIV/AIDS? How do religious institutions and communities give meaning to HIV/AIDS through acts of remembering and/or silencing?

5. Diaspora, AIDS and strangerhood
This call for papers invites papers on the subject of religious narratives on HIV/AIDS in the African diaspora. Papers can relate to the themes mentioned above but could also address the diasporic situation specifically. How does the context of the diaspora impact on the shaping of religio-biographies of HIV/AIDS? What narratives are developed by (institutions of) receiving countries on the topic of African migrants and HIV/AIDS and how does this impact on their self-narratives? What effect does ‘strangerhood’ have on the meanings given to HIV/AIDS in personal biographies?

Practical Information
The conference will be held at the University of Groningen, the Netherlands on 13, 14 and 15 December 2012. Abstracts (max. 300 words) should be submitted to the convenors for selection by 15 May. The selected speakers will be notified by 15 June and a conference programme, including the keynote speakers, will be announced in due course. The conference fee is € 40. For further information, go to www.irnara.org

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