HUMAN DIGNITY AND HIV/AIDS[1]

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Abstract

The HI virus speaks to people across national boundaries and evokes different reactions. In this article an analysis is made of the place awarded to the notion of "human dignity" in the religion-HIV/AIDS discourse and differences in perspective on "human dignity" as possible grounding principle for this discourse in both African and Western contexts. In Africa this is related to the notion of the imago Dei and in the West to the notion of the imago hominis. Because of the danger of "human dignity", given its foundational position in international charters and jurisdiction, becoming an empty concept, it is contended that the concept of "honour", which actually encompasses that of "dignity" and its necessary counterpart, self-respect, might offer a common basis for a religious discourse uniting Africa and the West in finding a common language that will help people to not only escape the stigma, but also to act upon the need for the eradication of this pandemic. In this discourse God is seen as a friend who has compassion, shows respect for human beings, is trustworthy and non-judgemental and is One who cares unconditionally.

Key Concepts: Dignity, HIV/AIDS, Imago Dei, Imago Hominis

Hundreds of people contract HIV in South Africa daily, most of them in the poor, often dangerous township communities of crowded tin and concrete shacks. In the latest report of the United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (i.e. May 2006) it is reported that South Africa's AIDS epidemic shows no evidence of declining,[2] while policymakers in so-called Western countries in the same month (i.e. May 2006) considered no longer call HIV/AIDS an epidemic, but to declare it a chronic illness. This is of course due to the availability and success of the treatment with antiretroviral drugs in Western countries. Contextual differences together with an epidemic of this magnitude has a major impact on the people of South Africa, not only because the HI virus affect the people it dwells in, but also because it affects the many not-infected people of good will who are tirelessly working on different levels in society towards finding a solution for this threat. At the same time this virus speaks to the minds and hearts of people all over the world because the world has become one big global family. Nations are connected to one another whether they like it or not. And yet nations have their own discourses on dealing with issues regarding this pandemic, which all in some way or another refer consciously or subconsciously to the dignity of human beings.

In this article a very brief description will be given of some striking issues that are at stake in the different discourses related to religion and HIV/AIDS from both the African and the so-called Western contexts. At the same time an attempt will be made to isolate the portrayal of the notion of "human dignity" in these discourses. Reflection on the usefulness

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[2] *Report on the global AIDS epidemic: Executive summary: A unaids 10th anniversary special edition*, Geneva, 2006, 6.

of this concept as a grounding theological principle in the HIV/AIDS discourse and the implications of a modification of it for theology will conclude this contribution.

African Discourse on Religion and HIV/AIDS

It seems as if a broad consensus exist among scholars from diverse faiths and denominations on the fact that religion have not always played a positive role in guiding human behaviour. It is said that the religious community has reinforced stigmatisation and discrimination, e.g. by giving conflicting messages about condom use and by interpreting HIV/AIDS as God's punishment of sinners. The stigmatisation has also been enhanced by Christianity's uneven introduction of sexual shame with regard to pre-marital and extra-marital sex.[3] This results in defensive behaviour, fatalism and self-stigmatisation among its members.[4] Maluleke calls theologians and the church "slow and silent" and typifies the stance of African theology with regard to dealing with HIV/AIDS as "theologically impotent".[5]

However, this critique did not silence the voice of many scholars who recognise the importance of religion in the African context and pose that theology and faith communities should form part of the efforts to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS. Maluleke complements his own critique with the statement that "we now need theologies that will help us deal with the challenge of HIV/AIDS".[6] This statement has been supported by others. From an analysis of the impact and symbolic value that widely used metaphors in public discourse, such as the "African Renaissance" and the "Rainbow nation", might have, Olivier assessed that HIV/AIDS is excluded from the national imagery in the discourse of national hope and concluded that "the church has a unique opportunity to lead and invigorate the fight against HIV/AIDS through a cautious application of 'hope'".[7] Conradie firmly states that one task the church cannot neglect is to offer a plausible account of "each aspect of the Christian faith". He says: "The pandemic requires from us nothing less than a revision of the entire Christian dogmatics."[8] Koopman takes this challenge a step further in an article on the ethical and theological challenge of the HIV/AIDS pandemic for theology by formulating and rubricating questions with regard to every classical dogmatic locus, such as Christology, pneumatology, eschatology and so on.[9] It seems scholars have taken up the challenge and have formulated the agenda for the theological discussion. Important themes that have been identified are the following: (i) AIDS and God-image (ii) AIDS and the Bible (iii) AIDS, sexuality and sexual ethics (iv) AIDS and the church (v) AIDS and being human (vi) AIDS and women (vii) reflection on AIDS and concepts of health, illness and healing (viii)

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[3]   Glaser, C 2005. "Sex, disease and stigma in South Africa: Historical perspective", *African Journal of AIDS Research*, 4 (1), 2005, 29.

[4]   Tiendrebeogo, G and Buykx, M 2001. "Faith-based organisations and HIV/AIDS prevention and impact mitigation in Africa", *Royal Tropical Institute, Bulletin* 361, Amsterdam: KIT, 17.

[5]   Maluleke, TM 2003. "Towards an HIV/AIDS-sensitive curriculum", in Dube, MW *HIV/AIDS and the curriculum: Methods of integrating HIV/AIDS in theological programmes*, Geneva: WCC Publications, 61, 65.

[6]   *Ibid.* 65.

[7]   Olivier, J, Hope in view of HIV/AIDS in South Africa: Public discourse, faith and the future (Abstract of MPhil thesis in HIV/AIDS at UCT).

[8]   Conradie, EM. "HIV/AIDS and human suffering: Where on earth is God?", unpublished paper read at a conference on "The challenge of HIV/AIDS to Christian Theology", held at the University of the Western Cape, 30th July, 2001.

[9]   Koopman, N 2004. "HIV en AIDS als ethische en theologische uitdaging in Zuid-Afrika", *Theologisch Debat*, 4 (1), 2004, 55-56.

reflection on AIDS and concepts of life and death.[10] The significance of these aspects is rated so high that Maluleke proposed that other vital issues like class, race, gender, culture and poverty are to be reflected upon anew, but then in the light of the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

Turning to the theme of this article, one can say that many, if not all, of these issues concern the notion of human dignity, but where it is used in relation to HIV/AIDS as such the accent does not explicitly lie on the grounding of the concept. Scholars mainly introduce the concept as a legitimisation for rejecting abominable thought, practices or behaviour. Maluleke, for example, pleads for a critical analysis of cultures in terms of their fallibility, but he warns that it should never be biased against African people created in the image of God – thereby implying their human dignity. The ecumenical advocacy alliance defines the number one goal in its HIV/AIDS campaign as: "The dignity and rights of people living with HIV/AIDS and an attitude of care and solidarity that rejects all forms of stigmatisation and discrimination."[11] Ackermann, in her exposé of stigma and HIV/AIDS, holds that stigma is a sin, "because it denies the reality that we are created equally in the image of God (…) and that we all have equal worth as bearers of the godly image".[12] Pillay, in her search for a theology of gender equality, connects the dignity of women to the notions of respect and care.[13] Koopman, in arguing for the restoration of human dignity after apartheid, grounds the principle in the Trinity and also links dignity with being created in the image of God.[14] For all these scholars important keywords in this regard are reciprocity, mutuality, equality and relationality which seemingly touch the first point mentioned on the theological agenda, namely, AIDS and God-image. This subject also is related to the fifth issue on the agenda: AIDS and being human, because it is untenable in theology to divorce doctrine of God from anthropology. But as far as this very brief exposé is concerned, the accent lies on the theological pole of the dichotomy, namely on the *imago Dei*.

Western Discourse on Religion and HIV/AIDS

The discourse on religion and HIV/AIDS in the so-called Western context places a different accent. Although much progress has been made concerning the emancipation and acceptance of gays and lesbians (in the Netherlands the prevalence of the HI virus still is highest amongst men having unprotected sex with men), the attitudes of religious institutions toward HIV/AIDS still differ greatly, varying from compassion to antagonism. The church is swaying between condemnation and solidarity, whereby people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWA) are acknowledged as infected human beings entitled to help, while at the same time they are condemned for their lifestyles.[15] Most mainline churches denounce the view that God punishes people with HIV/AIDS and there is growing momentum towards becoming involved in the fight against HIV/AIDS. However, there is also great concern about,

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[10]   Maluleke *op.cit.* 74.

[11]   Tiendrebeogo et al. *op.cit.* 31.

[12]   Ackermann, D, "Stigma, HIV and AIDS: An embodied practical theological response", unpublished paper read on 30th July 2004, at the UWC.

[13]   Pillay, MN. "See this woman? Toward a theology of gender equality in the context of HIV and AIDS", 13 (unpublished article).

[14]   Koopman, N. "An anthropology of vulnerability, human dignity and human rights," unpublished paper read at the Kampen-Stellenbosch consultation, Kampen, 10th October, 2005.

[15]   Van Vugt, J 1996. "AIDS en pastoraat: tussen een ambivalente kerk en ene veeleisende praktijk." In Van Vugt, J (red.), *AIDS en drempels: studies over de psychische en sociale gevolgen van seropositiviteit en AIDS in de naaste omgeving.* Baarn: Gooi en Sticht, 134.

especially Roman Catholic, views on the human body, sexual love and the related issue of the use of condoms.[16]

The current discourse in the Western context concerning religion and HIV/AIDS is mainly directed towards the relation between religion and science and especially takes place in the Anglo-Saxon world. Strassberg analysed the prevalence and use of metaphors, e.g. those related to war, survival, extinction and God in American society and argues for the construction of a global ethic of survival, based on an ethic of care. She pleads for the construction of counternarratives (i.e. against narratives of extinction: Religious stories of creation linked to "the end of the world") that are based on various sources from scientific disciplines and various religious traditions.[17] Hunt strongly criticises the fact that Christian theo-ethical reflection on HIV/AIDS has largely focused on sexual ethics with mostly un-helpful results. She pleads for a rethinking of economic issues, the relationship between church and state (religion and politics) and the morality of the pharmaceutical industry, whereby a moratorium is declared on sexual ethical debate (especially homosexuality) until good-faith efforts have been made on economic and racial matters.[18] Hefner explores the necessity for a theology of disease and holds that it will teach us "about death and how to die, because otherwise we will not know how to live in a diseased world". Human beings are fragmented, being caught up between wholeness and integration on the one hand and disintegration on the other.[19] Rinken also deals with the issue of finitude in relation to the modern self. He concludes that HIV poses an extraordinary challenge to the established type of subjectivity in Western society, namely a fragile "self-construction that relies on a sense of continuity and coherence" or an object of devotion, which implies what he calls, "the looming of the shadow of God".[20] Strikingly a lot of empirical research has been done on the spiritual and psychological impact of HIV/AIDS on different populations, (religious) coping and HIV/AIDS and the determinants of risky sexual behaviour.[21] In conclusion, Moore argues for a radical reconstruction of theology that is based on compassion, which in turn is to be seen as an emotion. It is of paramount importance that our theologies help us to understand the deeply destructive feelings that often guide our actions.[22]

As far as human dignity in relation to HIV/AIDS is concerned, it is a relatively absent theme in the Western discourse. Strassberg, in following the sociologist Bauman, accentu-

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[16]   Van der Ven , JA 1997. "Enkele reflecties bij AIDS", *Praktische Theologie*, 24 (1), 1997, 18.

[17]   Strassberg, BA 2004. "A pandemic of terror and terror of a pandemic: American cultural responses to HIV/AIDS and bioterrorism", *Zygon*, 39 (2), 2004, 435, 443.

[18]   Hunt, ME 2004. "AIDS: Globalization and its discontents", *Zygon* , 39 (2), 2004, 465, 474-478.

[19]   Hefner, P 2004. "The necessity for a theology of disease: Reflections on totalities and fragments", *Zygon*, 39 (2), 2004, 495-496.

[20]   Rinken, S 2000. *The AIDS crisis and the modern self: Biographical self-construction in the awareness of finitude*, Dordrecht: Kluwer, 215.

[21]   Cf. Price, GN and MD Granger 2005. *Does religion constrain risky sexual behaviour associated with HIV/AIDS?*, Research Report Series 05-03, Mississippi Urban Research Center, Mississippi: Jackson University; Elifson, KW, Klein, H and CE Sterk. 2003. "Religiosity and HIV risk behaviour involvement among 'at risk' women", *Journal of Religion and Health*, 42 (1), 2003; Somlai, AM and TG Heckman. 2000. "Correlates of spirituality and well-being in a community sample of people living with HIV disease", *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, 3 (1), 2000; Herek, GM and JP Capitanio 1998. "Symbolic prejudice or fear of infection? A functional analysis of AIDS-related stigma among heterosexual adults", *Basic and Applied Social Psychology*, 20 (3), 1998; Simoni, JM, Martone, MG and JF Kerwin. 2002. "Spirituality and psychological adaptation among women with HIV/AIDS: Implications for counselling", *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 40 (2), 2002; Siegel, K and EW Schrimsaw. 2002. "The perceived benefits of religious and spiritual coping among older adults living with HIV/AIDS", *Journal for the scientific study of religion*, 41 (1), 2002.

[22]   Moore, JF 2004. "Is there none left to say anything?", *Zygon*, 39(2), 2004, 517, 522.

ates that human dignity lies in the choice to be moral that humans have,[23] while Moore rhetorically asks whether theology should accept rejection of human dignity (like in the way Shariá law defines sexual promiscuity in Muslim countries and at the same time is offered as proof that Muslims are ready to deal with HIV/AIDS more successfully) in order to create a collateral effect in fighting the AIDS pandemic.[24] It seems that human dignity is presupposed in the discourse on religion and HIV/AIDS and is not a point of discussion within this context. The anthropological pole of the theology-anthropology dichotomy receives practically all the attention in the Western discourse. The accent lies, so to say, on the *imago hominis*. It should be added that there is a "separate" discussion going on about the conceptualisation and grounding of human dignity where the doctrine of the *imago Dei* is being explored.[25] This is, however, not applied to the discourse on religion and HIV/AIDS.

Convergences and Divergences

What conclusion can then be drawn from this very brief report on some of the issues identified in current religion-HIV/AIDS discourses in both the African and Western contexts? And what are the implications of this conclusion for the notion of human dignity?

Although the *imago Dei* pole of the theology-anthropology dichotomy receives greater weight in African discourses and the *imago hominis* pole in Western discourses, overlapping themes such as sexuality and sexual ethics, economy and poverty, stigmatisation and self-stigmatisation, fatalism and hope, care and compassion, God image and image of man, exist on a structural level. These themes might, despite the overlap, be substantiated differently, because of differences in frames of reference, conceptualisations of theology and their adherent points of departure. Yet there is a recognisable mutual drive in both contexts toward contributing to the eradication of HIV/AIDS by fully exploiting the intellectual and practical resources available – although one must admit that at this stage one can only contribute to the prevention of HIV/AIDS – which asks for interdisciplinary and international cooperation.

In an attempt to find a grounding principle for this enterprise, both contexts will agree on the notion of human dignity, although it is not a biblical concept.[26] There will be agreement among religious scholars that this notion could be grounded in the doctrine of the *imago Dei* – to the dismay of scholars in modern sociocultural paradigms who seem to feel that Christianity colonised and baptised this secular concept.[27] However, within Christianity as well there is no unanimity about the conceptualisation and grounding of human dignity. Different models of the *imago Dei* have been developed, such as the substantive, relational and functional

23 Strassberg *op.cit.* 460.

24 Moore *op.cit.* 518.

25 Cf. Case-Winters, A 2004. "Rethinking the image of God", *Zygon*, 39 (4), 2004; Herzfeld, N 2002. "Creating in our own image: Artificial intelligence and the image of God", *Zygon*, 37 (2), 2002; Cobb, JB. "Human dignity and the Christian Tradition", http://www.religion-online.org; Kim, K, "Imago Dei: The transcendent basis of true liberty and just authority", http://www.acton.org; Slipko, T 2005. "The anthropological basis of human dignity", *Forum Philosophicum*, Kraków, 10, 2005.

26 Roukema, R. "Human dignity in the Bible", paper read at the Stellenbosch-Kampen consultation on human dignity, Kampen, 10th October 2005. Roukema holds that human dignity is not a biblical concept, since it is a concept which the biblical authors were in a certain sense not acquainted with.

27 Murphy, SG. "On the doctrine of the Imago Dei". http://www.geocities.com/mnapologetics/ImagoDei.htm. Cf. also the contribution of K Spronk in this collection. Spronk argues that biblical texts show little respect for human dignity as a phenomenon.

views.[28] Another difficulty is that the construct "human dignity", in the way it is being used, does not fully reflect the mutuality and reciprocity it claims to possess, because we only speak about human dignity and not about "divine dignity" (dignity of God) as well. Given these difficulties, does one really need this concept in the religion-HIV/AIDS discourse? It is widely known that the notion of human dignity is firmly entrenched in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union and the South African Constitution. This means that the rights of people living with Aids (PLWA) could/should be guaranteed without any theological grounding of human dignity. Did the concept as a grounding principle then not become empty, devoid of meaning, in theology? Should it then be abandoned or should it rather be adapted in theology's search for a grounding principle that will reflect the interconnectedness of the *imago Dei* and the *imago hominis* evenly? There seem to be no final answers but, if one consciously chooses to attempt an adaptation of human dignity as grounding principle in the religion-HIV/AIDS discourse, it might pay to look at it in its relation to the concept of "honour".

Human Dignity and Honour

Ample biblical evidence can be found of the notion of honour. The Bible speaks about the honour (or glory) of man and the honour (or glory) of God, which are represented by the Greek word-groups *timē* and *doxa*.[29] It would going too far to go into the etymology of these concepts too deeply, but it is important to notice that the concept of "honour" is a more dynamic concept than "human dignity", because it incorporates both acting and being. Additionally, the honour of man and the honour of God are not mutually exclusive as seems to be in the case with dignity.[30]

Honour has two sides, namely dignity and self-respect. The meaning of "dignity", the one side of the coin, has shifted toward a kind of honour that is automatic rather than earned. In the present political discourse it is especially related to race, sexual orientation and national origin. Dignity comprises respect for others in the sense of the objective, unbiased consideration and regard for their rights, values, beliefs and property. In this sense dignity relates to the public and political existence of human beings in an organised society that acknowledges that all people in it are connected to one another by a common fate and destiny.[31] Self-respect, the other side of the coin, regards the respect a person has for him or herself. This self-respect implies that one values oneself with generosity and leniency from the perspective of what one strives to become as the fulfilment of one's personal destiny in life.[32] Psychologically speaking self-respect can be achieved only when one experiences an appropriate level of respect in all circumstances, regardless of whether or not the respecter feels that the person potentially respected has earned it. Only then does a person become dignified. When people do not experience respect their subjective appraisal is negative.

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[28] *Ibid.* The substantive view of the doctrine of the *imago Dei* refers to certain qualities or attributes in humans that mirror those of God Himself (p. 3); the relational view was formulated mainly by neoorthodox theologians like Karl Barth and Emil Brunner who hold that the *imago Dei* is not understood in terms of structural qualities in humans, but comprises a relationship between God and humans and between humans and humans (p. 4); the functional view holds that the image of God becomes manifest directly in that which a person does (p. 5).

[29] Aalen, S 1976. "Glory, Honour", in Brown, C (ed.), *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, Vol. 2, Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 44-52.

[30] *Ibid.* 51.

[31] Vosman, F 1996. "AIDS tussen zelfrespect en eer. Een moraaltheologische waardering van het authenticiteitsethos", in Van Vugt, *op.cit.* 196.

[32] *Ibid.* 197.

This results in the shattering of their beliefs about themselves and associated self-relevant emotions. Pride turns into shame and together with low self-esteem and consequent unhappiness, shame might lead to self-hatred. A shattered self-image can be severe for both individual and society. An exploration of these dynamics with lack of honour as result might give some insight into the enduring mystery as to why so many South Africans are not able to avoid HIV infection when nearly everyone knows how it is transmitted.

By introducing honour as a grounding principle in the religion-HIV/AIDS discourse, one might take the thorn out of the flesh of the dignity-*imago Dei* problematic, because the reciprocal and interconnected character of honour moulds the *imago Dei* and the *imago hominis* together into one construct. Dignity no longer stands on its own, but lies imbedded in a construct where honour is the primal theologoumenon and self-respect is dignity's logical and necessary counterpart.

Theology and Honour: God as Friend

The impact this honour-construct might have on the God-image will now be considered very briefly. The action character of honour combined with the notions of mutuality, reciprocity and relatedness found in the dignity-concept give rise to an association with the metaphor of friendship. The image of God as friend might be strong enough to combine the intellectual and practical efforts of scholars from both the African and Western contexts to find a common forum for fighting HIV/AIDS. Strikingly God as friend is a foreign God-image in neither of these contexts. Kasambala states that in Africa the image of God as friend evokes confidence in the trustworthiness of God in times of difficulties.[33] And from an unexpected Western, I may say postmodern, secularised, perspective, Vattimo poses the notion of the friendliness of God, which culminates in compassion and care.[34]

Thus, a theology of God as a friend with characteristics of trustworthiness, non-judgementalness, honour, compassion and care might offer a common basis for African and Western contexts to develop a different or new substantiation of the other loci of Christian dogmatics. Additionally, it will also have relevance for the other themes on the theological agenda regarding the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

Conclusion

This article analysed the place of the notion of "human dignity" in the religion-HIV/AIDS discourse in African and Western context as well as differences in perspectives on it as the grounding principle for this discourse. In Africa this is related to the notion of the *imago Dei* and in the West to the notion of the *imago hominis*. Because of the danger of "human dignity" becoming an empty concept, given its foundational position in international charters and jurisdiction, it has been contended that the concept of "honour", which actually encompasses that of "dignity" and its necessary counterpart, self-respect, might offer a common basis for a religious discourse uniting Africa and the West in finding a common language that will help people to not only escape the stigma, but also to act upon the need for the eradication of this pandemic. In this discourse God is seen as a friend who has compassion, shows respect for human beings, is trustworthy and non-judgemental and is One who cares unconditionally.

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[33] Kasambala, AE 2005. "The impact of an African spirituality and cosmology on God-images in Africa: A hallenge to practical theology and pastoral ministry", in *International Journal for Practical Theology*, vol. 9, 2005, 320.

[34] Vattimo, G 1998. *Ik geloof dat ik geloof*, Amsterdam: Boom, 88-100.