Chapter 6
Religion and Masculinities in Africa: its impact on HIV and gender based violence.
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Introduction

The study of religion in Africa is a product of external influences. The discipline has been closely related to the experiences of the continent and its encounter with “outsiders.” To a large extent, the study of religion in Africa has been shaped by European traditions. The implication has been that the methods and approaches adopted in the study of religion in Africa have been derived from outside of Africa. For a continent that has waged liberation struggles, this becomes a contentious issue. How can African scholars be subservient to the theories and methods of their erstwhile former colonisers? Can African scholars of religion have the confidence to take the discipline in a different direction as they respond to African realities? Such questions lie at the heart of debates on developing African traditions in the study of religion in Africa.

This chapter utilises the emerging field of religion and masculinities to explore the opportunities for Africanization. The main argument is that African material will necessarily colour and influence the study of religion in Africa. This is rightly so: being located in Africa means that the study of religion should not be the same as it is elsewhere in the world. The chapter argues that the discourse on religion and masculinities in Africa provides a valuable opportunity for African scholars to be creative and illustrate the possibility of doing religious studies with an African flavour.

In the first section, the paper outlines male dominance in the study of religion in Africa. In the second section it describes the discourse on gender in the study of religion in Africa, paying particular attention to women’s issues and the subsequent marginalisation of men. The third section briefly explains the factors that have given rise to attention on masculinities in Africa, laying emphasis on the impact of the HIV epidemic. The fourth section examines how the theme of religion and masculinities offers a valuable opportunity to African scholars to chart a new path in the discipline. It analyses the opportunities for Africanization. In conclusion, the paper argues that the Africanization of religious studies in Africa must be undertaken urgently.

Male Dominance and the Study of Religion in Africa

The study of religion in Africa has generally been gender blind until very recently. This is due to the fact that the pioneering scholars in the study of religion were European and, later, African males who did not pay attention to the dynamics of gender. In his useful application of the ideas of Edward Said to the study of African Traditional Religions, Henk J. van Rinsum suggests that Geoffrey Parrinder could be regarded as the patriarchal authority, with John S. Mbiti and E. Bolaji Idowu as “followers and elaborators.” In this scheme, Jacob Olupona, Friday Mbon and Umar H.

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2 “Africa” is a multivalent term. It is used in a general sense to cover Anglophone sub-Saharan Africa. While there are notable differences in the growth of the discipline in the area under analysis, there are sufficient similarities to justify the generalisations.
4 There is greater gravitation towards the term, “African Indigenous Religions.” However, I retain the term “African Traditional Religions” due to its recurrence in the literature consulted.
D. Danfulani would be the “new authorities.”5 As becomes apparent, the succession line is exclusively male.

The study of religion in Africa has therefore been (and continues to be) a male-dominated discipline6 As was the case with the development of the discipline in Europe, male scholars, interests and methodologies have been dominant. While it might appear controversial to describe methodologies as “male”, it must be appreciated that approaches such as the phenomenological approach are not gender neutral. Although they purport to be “scientific and scholarly,” they are very much an outcome of male interests and preoccupations. By carrying over from Europe to Africa this male dominance of the discipline, religious studies missed an opportunity to have a different outlook in Africa.

Male scholars have been shaping the direction of religious studies in Africa since the 1960s, when the discipline sought to establish itself more firmly on the continent. Across the various regions of Africa it was male scholars who were replacing departing European scholars. In this regard the coalescence of indigenous and European patriarchies has played a major role in excluding women from religious studies. Patriarchy privileges male interests, needs and even frivolities. As a result, a visit to most departments of religious studies in Africa will familiarise one with male “gate keepers and patriarchal authorities.”7

It is important to highlight the fact that the dominance of men in religious studies is in keeping with the general absence of women in higher education in Africa. There is need to appreciate the “politics of exclusion in higher education”8 and the historical factors that have led to male dominance. An awareness of the historical and ideological factors that have kept women away from higher education will enable one to put the absence of women from the study of religion into proper perspective.

Women in Africa (as is the case the world over) generally entered academia later than their male counterparts. A systematic and deliberate colonial policy ensured that African women were excluded from the various ivory towers that dotted the continent. Not only did missionary education disproportionately extend educational opportunities to males, but men’s education was also accorded higher priority than that of women. A variety of factors, including the emphasis on female responsibility for domestic chores, generalised conditions of poverty and the overarching influence of patriarchy, combined to make women’s access and entrance to academic institutions an unreachable dream for much of the colonial period. Women were a rare commodity in the annals of academia, and were Africa’s true “drawers of water, and hewers of wood.”9

Thus men have dominated the academic study of religion in Africa. The situation in religious studies remained unchanged until the late 1970s, when some departments of religious studies in West Africa began to employ the odd woman lecturer. It was only in the 1990s, through the forceful work by the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (hereafter, the Circle) led by the Ghanaian theologian Mercy Amba Oduyoye, that more departments of religious studies began to

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7 The approach to power in African academia (as indeed elsewhere) is characterised by the dominance of the “power over” paradigm, in contrast to the “power with” paradigm. While former induces suffocation, the later promotes solidarity and a shared vision.


recruit women scholars. However, the situation is still far from satisfactory, as the percentage of women scholars active within the discipline remains very low. As with their counterparts in theology, African women undertaking religious studies face numerous challenges. However, those that have been able to face these challenges and were able to enter into this male-dominated discipline began to pay attention to the issue of gender.

**Gender and the Study of Religion in Africa**

Since the 1990s, the Circle has played a major role in ensuring that gender is put on the agenda of the study of religion in Africa. Although most of the Circle activists are theologians, some are involved in religious studies. Yet others straddle both worlds. Circle authors have challenged the church in Africa and departments of religious studies at academic institutions to take women’s issues seriously. Whereas previously the departments of religious studies had given the impression that religion meant the same to men and women, women scholars have sought to highlight the significance of religion to women (as opposed to what it means to men).

African women scholars of religion have challenged the dominant approaches to the discipline by paying attention to the status of women in the various religions of Africa. In particular, they have dwelt on the status of women in African Traditional Religions, Christianity and Islam. Whereas male scholars have tended to describe these religions in general terms, women scholars have been more interested in focusing on women’s voices. In her book, *Women in the Yoruba Religious Sphere*, Oyeronke Olajubu clarifies this stance:

> Where people extol complementary gender relations, but accounts of people’s culture and religious traditions present the male as the active participant and the female as docile and passive, there is a valid reason for the hermeneutic of suspicion. This is very true of Yoruba religious tradition, which is the focus of this work. There is need to retrieve, reinterpret, and reevaluate previous assumptions about women in religious traditions to arrive at the center point where all voices are heard and respected.

The focus on gender has been accentuated by the Circle’s focus on HIV and its impact on women and girls in Africa. The Circle has emerged as the most consistent group writing on HIV, religion and gender in Africa. The Circle has demonstrated how inequitable gender relations buttressed by religion and culture have left African women and girls more vulnerable to HIV. Women scholars in religious studies and theology have shown how religion and culture have been abused to condemn women and children to premature deaths in the era of HIV in Africa. Whereas approaches such as phenomenology call upon scholars to be neutral, African women scholars have spoken out in favour of restructuring religions in order to achieve gender justice.

By placing emphasis on women’s religious experiences, African women scholars of religion such as Isabel A. Phiri have forced the discipline to become conscious of gender dynamics. Although many male scholars of religion have resisted applying the tools of gender analysis to their work, it is fair to say that the face of the discipline has been affected decisively by the arrival of African women scholars. While some male scholars condescendingly dismiss gendered approaches to the study of

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11 A separate study is required to explore the relationship between theology and religious studies in Africa. However, a number of practitioners have moved between the two areas with relative ease.


religion in Africa\textsuperscript{14}, it must be acknowledged that women scholars have been productive and effective.

Emphasising women’s religious experiences, however, has had the effect of effacing men from the discourse on gender. This has had the negative effect of suggesting that men do not have a gender. Whereas gender means the socially prescribed roles for men and women, the trend has been to focus exclusively on women. Around 2000, it became clear to gender activists that there was need to bring men back into the discourse on gender and HIV. As a result, there has been a notable increase in interest in masculinities and religion in Africa. For example, the \textit{Journal of Constructive Theology}, published by the School of Religion and Theology at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, has devoted two full issues to the theme of masculinity.\textsuperscript{15}

\textbf{Masculinities, HIV and Religion in Africa}

Recognising the importance of men in the response to HIV, there have been calls to pay more attention to the social construction of men. It has become generally accepted that society plays an important role in shaping men. It is society that prescribes what men may or may not do. Of significance has been society’s double standards regarding the sexual behaviour of men and women. Whereas women are expected to be chaste and restrained, men are excused when they have multiple sexual partners. Furthermore, men are by far most often the perpetrators of sexual and gender-based violence (GBV). Such observations have led to calls to pay more attention to masculinities\textsuperscript{16} in the time of HIV.\textsuperscript{17}

Religion is a major force in the construction of masculinities across Africa (and in other parts of the world). As a guide to belief and action, religion equips its adherents with ethical standards. African Traditional Religions, Christianity and Islam all have certain expectations regarding men. To a large extent, they construct men to be the leaders and to control women and children. As with most other religions in the world, they are decidedly patriarchal\textsuperscript{18}; through their sacred writings, oral traditions, myths, inherited beliefs and practices, they posit men as being superior to women.

Faced with the challenges of HIV and GBV, activists in Africa have been calling for the transformation of masculinities. They contend that religion has a role to play in this transformation, as it has up until now promoted aggressive masculinities. For example, many men cite the scriptures of various religions to defend their authority to “discipline” women. An abuse of sacred texts and traditions by men has allowed men to project having multiple sexual partners and using violence as “divinely sanctioned.” Others maintain that as “heads”, they have the license to make decisions without consulting women. In many instances this leads to GBV as women resist such abuses of power. In short, religion has been implicated in promoting death-dealing masculinities in the time of HIV and GBV.\textsuperscript{19}

Furthermore, the processes of urbanization, Arabization and Christianization in the preceding centuries have had a telling effect on how men in Africa express their masculinities. The fact that Arabization and Westernization demonised African ethnic masculinities as primitive, heathen and barbaric, did not bar the latter from cross-pollinating the masculinities of the former. As a result the

\begin{footnotes}
\item Incredibly, some male lecturers (in some African universities) contend that publications on gender must not be considered in promotion processes, as “gender is not academic”!
\item Issue 12(1) in 2006 and Issue 14(1) in 2008.
\item The plural (“masculinities”) is used as there is no single, uniform way of being a man across different religions and cultures.
\end{footnotes}
current African elite masculinities are predominantly crossbreeds and hybrids of indigenous masculinity and western modernity. To prove that they are men, many African leaders sacrifice their own lives and those of innocent women, men and children at the altar of their own masculine ambiguity.

There is a growing appreciation that religions can play a constructive role in challenging men to be change agents in the face of HIV and gender-based violence in Africa. Men must be challenged to have new approaches towards power. This will require rigorous analyses of the religious and cultural factors that inform aggressive masculinities. Researchers in different African contexts will need to interrogate the African appropriation of sacred texts in Christianity and Islam, as well as the use of oral traditions to support patriarchal dominance. Deconstructing and reinterpretting these texts to transform masculinities must be undertaken in order to discover and deliver “the justice men owe to women” and acknowledging the “positive resources from world religions”.

From the foregoing discussion, it is clear that there is growing interest in the area of masculinities, HIV and religion. As this is a new area of research and publication, there is room for Africanizing. However, before illustrating how the area of masculinities and religion can have “African traditions,” there is need to grapple, briefly, with the very concept of Africanization. I undertake this task in the following section.

**Africanizing Religious Studies: A Characterization and an Overview of the Challenges**

The discourse on religion and masculinities in Africa avails one of a number of opportunities for Africanizing the field of study. However, there is no unanimity on both the meaning and desirability of Africanization. In general, Africanizing refers to the process of ensuring that African concerns, issues, methods and personnel are reflected in a given discipline. With special reference to religious studies, Africanizing the discipline would mean that a student studying religion in Africa would be able to interact with African concerns, issues, methods and personnel in an African university. Walter Kamba, the University of Zimbabwe’s first black Vice Chancellor, offers some useful insights on Africanization following his appointment in 1981:

> It became necessary for the University to have its feet on Zimbabwean soil...It became essential to have a new ethos and orientation rooted in the new reality of Zimbabwe. To say this was not in any way to deny the unquestionable importance of the international dimension. There was, however, a need for the University of Zimbabwe to play, and be seen to play, a more active and meaningful role in the development of Zimbabwe.

From the foregoing citation one can argue that Africanization implies that institutions of higher learning should “have their feet on African soil.” They should strive to grapple with African issues and endeavour to find African solutions. However, they should do this knowing full well that universities necessarily have an international dimension and therefore ensure that African students are not alienated from the rest of the world during their studies.

In the case of religious studies, it is vital that students experience the discipline as reflecting an African ethos. The bulk of the material encountered should speak to the real-life situation of the student. The textbooks accessed and examples used must reflect African realities. A student

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22 Zimbabwe attained independence in 1980.

studying religion in Harare must be exposed to different material and contextual settings compared to a student studying religion in London. This would mean that religious studies has “its roots in African soil.” Of course, these students should still have a lot in common as both study in the same discipline.

The Africanization of religious studies faces a number of challenges. First, as discussed earlier, one has to realise that the discipline has its origins outside of Africa. This poses a major challenge to the discipline in an African context. African practitioners of the discipline are unavoidably heavily influenced by the formulations of the (Western) pioneers. The vision, procedures and goals have already been framed, forcing most practitioners to utilise pre-existing categories and concepts. This “burden of history” has meant that most African practitioners of the discipline are content, or are forced to be content, with rehashing the methodologies and conclusions that were reached by the European ancestors of the discipline. Since “African ancestors” of the discipline are still too few, African practitioners of the discipline have had to become merely “mediums” of European ancestors.

Secondly, the Africanization of religious studies in Africa has been compromised by the absence of vibrant methodological schools. Apart from the pioneering work done in countries such as Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, South Africa, Uganda, Botswana and Zimbabwe, most departments of religious studies in Africa continue to rely on publications from outside the continent. This still remains the situation decades after the process of decolonization started. While there are African publications, these tend to be rare and rarely replaced. Most reading lists on African Traditional Religions, for example, are made up of the earlier publications by Mbiti and Idowu. There has been very little innovation and expansion of the scope of the discipline. Even a recent essay by Mike P. Adogbo on the methodological challenges in studying African Traditional Religions hardly brings any new insights on method and theory in the study of religion. In the absence of rigorous theoretical reflections on the assumptions and approaches within religious studies in Africa, it has been difficult for “African traditions” to emerge.

A third challenge is the book famine that characterises the study of religion in Africa. Most religious studies courses in Africa are totally dependent on textbooks that were written and published in Europe and North America. There have been notable publishing initiatives in Kenya and South Africa, but these remain few and inadequate. In Nigeria considerable progress has been made, but mainly within the area of biblical studies. While there are significant publications within the field of Africanization, there remains a crying need for African scholars in religious studies to follow this lead and reflect on the process of Africanization.

Finally, there are some African scholars of religion who are uncomfortable with the very concept of Africanization. Given the intractable problems that Africa faces, it is understandable that some scholars would be wary of embracing a concept that seems to imply accepting the “ugly face” of the continent. Africa continues to struggle economically, socially and politically. The HIV epidemic has worsened the continent’s image as it gives the impression of a diseased and dying continent. Others contend that Africanization implies the lowering of standards. They are convinced that the concept is laden with ideological assumptions and that it results in acceptance of mediocrity.

Despite the challenges and misgivings surrounding Africanization, I am convinced that the study of religion in Africa must prioritise the process of Africanization. Failure to undertake Africanization

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26 This was done mainly by the Nigerian Association of Biblical Studies.
implies that the discipline will struggle to have a meaningful impact on the continent. I am also persuaded that the area of religion and masculinities offers useful insights into the process of Africanization. The following section therefore appropriates the theme of religion and masculinities to probe opportunities for Africanization.

**Religion and Masculinities: Opportunities for Africanization**

The foregoing section has outlined some of the major challenges facing the quest to Africanize religious studies. In this section, I seek to highlight how scholars working on religion and masculinities in Africa have ample scope for Africanizing in their academic endeavours. I argue that although concepts and material developed by scholars outside the continent is helpful, African scholars should not feel bound to work only within the parameters that have been set by their Western counterparts.

**Masculinities as research-focus in African Religious Studies**

One of the key aims of Africanization is to ensure that African concerns are at the centre of research efforts in religious studies. In the face of the HIV epidemic, the theme of masculinities must find a place in the study of religion in Africa. If the discipline is to be contextually sensitive and relevant to the lived realities of Africans, it must grapple with the theme of masculinities. The Circle has done well to bring gender to the fore. However, women scholars have tended to focus exclusively on women’s issues. To complement this process, there is need to undertake research into religion and the formation of masculinities in Africa.

For too long, the study of religion in Africa has waited for topics to come to the fore within the discipline in Europe and North America and then followed suit. This is the “follow my leader” mentality that continues to stifle the growth of the discipline and it is probably for this reason that the study of religion in Africa continues to struggle to integrate HIV as a focus area. Since HIV has not received attention within the discipline in Europe and North America, most African scholars do not feel confident to tackle it within their research, teaching and community engagement activities. Paying attention to masculinities within the study of religion in Africa will ensure that a key issue on the continent finds space within the curriculum. An added benefit would be that, as this theme has not yet received much scholarly attention, African scholars will not feel compelled to look to Western scholars for guidance and will be free to engage innovatively with the subject.

The study of the interface between religion and masculinities in Africa is an urgent undertaking as it will provide policy makers with helpful insights into HIV. Although the study of religion is often taken as an end in itself, the crisis brought about by HIV means that this is a luxury that Africa cannot afford. Pursuing knowledge for the sake of knowledge is indeed the mandate of the university, including universities based in Africa. However, in Africa accessing life-saving knowledge is equally (I shall return to this theme below). Consequently, the study of the relationship between religion and masculinities will equip and assist students, lecturers and the general public in creating strategies for effective interventions.

Research efforts in religious studies in Africa must be directed towards the transformation of masculinities in the face of HIV and GBV. This must become an urgent undertaking. Scholars in the various areas of religious studies must utilise the opportunity to reflect on how the current masculinities have not been beneficial to African communities. Writing on Islam in general, Trad Godsey has suggested the need for new conceptualisations of masculinity.

The redefining and reformulation of masculinity in the Muslim world to allow manliness to be expressed as weakness and vulnerability has both a Qur’anic and Prophetic precedent. While the AIDS pandemic creates an urgency for change, the Qur’an and the Sunnah have always contained tools to reconstruct manhood in a way that achieves greater gender equity for women and men alike.\(^{29}\)

The approach that Godsey adopts to Islam needs to be emulated in the reflections on masculinities in African Traditional Religions, African Christianity, African Islam, African Buddhism, and other religions found on the African religious sphere. How does a particular African religion shape the values that men hold dear? To what extent do these ideas of manhood pose a danger to women, children and other men? What are the redemptive values found in these religions and how do they challenge hegemonic masculinities that define manhood in contemporary African societies? Interacting with such questions will enable African scholars to indigenise scholarship on religion and masculinities and make it relevant to the struggles against HIV and GBV.

By paying attention to the interface between religion and masculinities, African scholars choose to focus on a theme that is of existential significance to African communities. They would be guided by African issues and concerns in their selection of the theme. While Randi R. Warne notes that (Western) scholarship that reflected on maleness and masculinity developed a high profile in the 1980s and 1990s\(^{30}\), it has not had an impact on the study of religion in Africa. By taking up the theme of religion and masculinities in the time of HIV, African scholars would be addressing a timely and relevant issue.

**Utilising African Material to Understand African Masculinities**

Alongside giving priority to African issues and concerns, Africanization also implies utilising African material to clarify (religious) concepts and phenomena. For example, if the term “religion” has been notoriously difficult to define in European and American religious studies, the question arises as to how or whether religion in Africa clarifies (or even, complicates) the concept. Similarly, studying religion and masculinities in Africa provides ample opportunity to expand the meaning of masculinities. How do religion and culture in Africa socialise men to understand themselves as men? Are there specific African notions of manhood that are at play? How do indigenous rites of passage such as circumcision contribute to the formation of masculinities in Africa? By responding to such questions, the study on religion and masculinities in Africa can provide valuable insights into the discourses on masculinity.

In studying the interface between religion and masculinity in Africa, African scholars must not blindly follow theories on masculinity that has been formulated in other contexts. To say this is not to suggest that Africa is not part of the human race. Rather, it is to highlight the need for African scholars to summon enough courage and confidence to formulate their own theories of masculinity. They have an opportunity to investigate and enrich the study of the relationship between religion and masculinity, using African resources and phenomena. This task is best executed by African scholars, as I shall argue below.

From the foregoing, it follows that African scholars of religion who venture into the theme of masculinities must charter new approaches to the phenomenon. Since the factors that form masculinities are shaped by specific contexts, African scholars must mine the African context to provide new perspectives on masculinities. In undertaking this exercise, African scholars should

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give priority to data on masculinities from African communities. Too often, African phenomena are forced to fit into imported theoretical schemes.

Utilising African material to understand religion and masculinity also means that African scholars must be willing to take the oral nature of African communities seriously. For example, there is need to pay attention to proverbs and their role in forming masculinities. African scholars need to interrogate proverbs that promote dangerous masculinities and draw attention to those that call upon men to be peaceful and tolerant. Furthermore, African scholars must make use of myths, folktales, music and other forms of communication in their analyses of the factors that inform masculinities in Africa.

**Applying Research Results on Religion and Masculinities for Social Transformation**

One of the biggest challenges facing the academic study of religion in Africa is to make it relevant to the process of social transformation. Critics wonder why scholars of religion demand respect when their teaching and research activities do not readily translate into an agenda to change African communities for the better. The question can be posed more directly: can the study of religion in Africa afford to be “only scholarly” and not contribute practically to the resolution of challenges facing African societies? It would appear that Africa cannot afford to pursue “knowledge for the sake of knowledge.” 31

Research results on religion and masculinities in Africa must be harnessed in the struggle for health and well-being. It would be futile to come up with research results that are relevant to the struggle for gender justice and fail to disseminate these results in a way that promotes active engagement in society. What is the value of discovering, for example, that certain religious beliefs and practices promote dangerous masculinities in the time of HIV, and then failing to embark on practical strategies to construct alternative masculinities? I am convinced that the study of religion and masculinities holds a lot of promise in terms of enabling scholars of religious studies to become socially engaged.

Embarking on transformative masculinities in the time of HIV and GBV would enable departments of religious studies in Africa to engage in what Paulo Freire called “the pedagogy of the oppressed.” 32 In applying this methodology, lecturers would ensure that education leads to freedom by engaging students in exercises that tackle real-life situations. In the context of religion and masculinities, students would grapple with how religion often sponsors destructive masculinities. They can then work towards transforming these harmful masculinities. According to Freire:

> **Students, as they are increasingly posed with problems relating to themselves in the world, and with the world, will feel increasingly challenged and obliged to respond to that challenge. Because they apprehend the challenge as interrelated to other problems within a total context, not as a theoretical question, the resulting comprehension tends to be increasingly critical and thus constantly less alienated. Their response to the challenge evokes new challenges, followed by new understandings; and gradually the students come to regard themselves as committed.** 33

**Conclusion**

The academic study of religion in Africa needs to set its own agenda and to give priority to issues that vex African communities. In this paper, I have drawn attention to the theme of religion and masculinities in the face of HIV and GBV. I have argued that research on this theme allows

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31 Chitando, Sub-Saharan Africa, p.121.
sufficient scope for Africanization. As the theme has not yet received extensive scholarly attention, there is potential for African scholars to shape this particular area of research without feeling threatened by European or American “expert/s”.

In closing, I must reiterate that the area of religion and masculinities has existential significance. Thus:

**Masculinities have come to the fore in contemporary discourses on the HIV epidemic.** There is need to interrogate men’s sexual behaviour, men’s violence against women and men’s ineffective leadership in the time of HIV. Departments of religious studies in Africa must become sites of struggle where these themes are examined and alternative masculinities are formulated. Graduates of religious studies must emerge as competent gender activists who critique aggressive masculinities. They must be actively involved in mobilising their communities to promote gender justice in the wake of HIV. Working with boys and young men, they must prepare a generation of men who are committed to partnership and mutuality.34

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