

*Full Length Research Paper*

# Human immunodeficiency virus/acquired immune deficiency syndrome (HIV/AIDS) as God's directive

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**Human immunodeficiency virus/acquired immune deficiency syndrome (HIV/AIDS) as God's directive** aimed at investigating the tenet that HIV/AIDS is God's punishment for those who engage in sexual intercourse outside the institution of marriage. A quantitative method in the form of descriptive statistics comprising frequency, percentage, chi-square and probability was used for data analysis. The sample comprised a diverse sample of 581 high school and university students drawn from America, Kenya, South Africa and Tanzania. Statistically, the majority of participants did not subscribe to the tenet that HIV/AIDS is God's directive for punishment for those who engage in sexual behaviour outside the holy matrimony. It was concluded that such tenet must be rejected and combated through public education, as it does not contribute to the prevention of HIV/AIDS transmission and deprive those infected from seeking relief for their physical, social, and spiritual painful suffering.

**Key words:** Human immunodeficiency virus/acquired immune deficiency syndrome (HIV/AIDS), transmission, God's intervention. God's judgement, forgiveness, compassion.

## INTRODUCTION

In many countries, human immunodeficiency virus/acquired immune deficiency syndrome (HIV/AIDS) is associated with committing sin or immorality. In Sub-Saharan Africa, religion has played both supportive and detrimental roles for those who are infected by HIV/AIDS. There are churches which for the purposes of maintaining and asserting moral ground and moral authority have made it very clear to their church members by drawing a link between sexual transgression and AIDS as sin and immorality (Mbonu et al., 2009; Kopelman, 2002; Phiri, 2004; Du Toit, 2012; Dete, 2012).

For example, church members are not united in holy matrimony before taking an HIV test. There are HIV church members who have had their membership suspended because they are considered sinners for

contracting HIV/AIDS. Kopelman (2002) expresses the view that HIV/AIDS affects Sub-Saharan Africa more than any other part of the world, and yet they are least equipped to combat it. This therefore calls for intervention from nations endowed with wealth and necessary recourses. However, the HIV/AIDS infected persons may be distanced from those ready to be of assistance, because of beliefs such as it being a punishment from God for engaging in sexual activity outside marriage. "Religious versions hold that God punishes them in order to castigate, encourage virtue, warn, rehabilitate (Kopelman, 2012) or maintain some cosmic order". Along similar train of thought, Hartwig et al. (2006) point out that there exists HIV/AIDS in Su-Saharan Africa which presents hindrance to HIV/AIDS prevention and intervention

which has been associated with faith-organizations which play a double role in the fostering and mitigating stigma.

Such religious and secular beliefs are not only untenable, but also are devoid of cogency, place blame on HIV/AIDS infected persons rather unjustly and further jeopardize the compassionate care patients deserve (Clifford, 2004; Du Toit, 2012; Mbonu et al., 2009). It is argued therefore that such views are dangerous and irrational, on account of their influencing policies and cost lives (Kopelman, 2002).

Phiri (2004) cites that there are people who regard HIV/AIDS as God's punishment for enjoying sexual immorality, and goes on to say that there are medical professional personnel who hold the view that they need not attend to HIV/AIDS patients because doing so would be interfering with God's work of punishing sinners. As a matter of fact, those who are HIV/AIDS positive also subscribe to the thought that they are punished as a result of engaging in sexual immorality (Rude 2003; Denis, 2003). Such belief does not bring relief to the HIV/AIDS infected, as it intensifies their suffering. It is proposed that attributing to God as punishing those who contract HIV/AIDS must be rejected (Phiri, 2004). Van Dyk and Van Dyk (2007) made a study of 1,352 regarding their view that HIV/AIDS was God's punishment. In response, the majority did not agree with the statement, but 16.7% supported that, indeed it was God's punishment for sinners. Manzell et al. (2011) cited one of the participants in their research arguing that, HIV/AIDS is but a scourge visited by God, because society has turned its back against religion and morality.

Similarly, Smith (2004) cites as follows: "This place is like Sodom and Gomorrah... are being punished for their sins. If people did not have sex here and there, if society were not corrupt, there would be no AIDS...Yes, it is God's punishment, but we have brought it on ourselves". According to Dete (2012) many people in Sub-Saharan Africa are eager to know more about HIV/AIDS and how they can get cured from such terrible disease, but the response they receive from some of their churches is that of hopelessness, as they are convinced beyond doubt that HIV/AIDS is but God's punishment for people who engage in sin. HIV/AIDS people are stigmatised through negative attitudes toward them. This is reflected by those who are not accepted in churches because they are living with HIV/AIDS; those who used to be members have been stripped of their membership; those who held important office or played an important role in church activities have been denied of such roles (Dete, 2012; Mbonu et al., 2009; Clifford, 2004; Du Toit, 2012; Hartwig et al., 2006; Kopelman, 2002).

From a biblical perspective, Barton (2012) is of the view that there will be no cure for HIV/AIDS, because such discovery will be in conflict with God's punishment for sin of immorality. On the other hand, Houdmann (2013)

argues that all diseases constitute a judgement from God. Therefore HIV/AIDS and all other diseases in the world are part of God's judgement in a world that is cursed of its creator God. On a sober note, nevertheless, Houdmann (2013) advances the argument that it is not for Christians to say a specific disease such as HIV/AIDS is God's judgement. He concludes that irrespective of the nature of disease one has, our responsibility comprises: being ministers of grace, love, mercy, forgiveness and compassion.

In summary, for the past two decades, both religious and secular organizations have had two positions on HIV/AIDS perception and interpretation. These positions are that HIV/AIDS is God's punishment for people who engage in immoral sexual activity falling outside the marriage institution. The second position has been that, HIV/AIDS patients need care, love and treatment rather than condemnation for what is referred to as immorality of sexual nature. Both positions have support from research findings that have been rather extensive during the last two decades. In view of the above, the present investigation sought to find out the extent to which a diverse sample would either support or reject the proposition that indeed HIV/AIDS is a directive from God's wrath against those who have turned against his commandment by engaging in sexual activity outside the sanctioned holy matrimony.

## METHODOLOGY

The sample of the present investigation comprised adolescents drawn from high school students based in Nairobi, Kenya and university students consisting of American, Kenyan, South African and Tanzanian participants both males and females. The total number of participants added up to 581 with a distribution of 157 Kenyan high school students, 102 Kenyan university students, 164 South African university students, 100 Tanzanian university students and 58 American college students.

### Measuring instrument

The questionnaire comprised one question soliciting a response on the basis of three options, namely "Yes, No, Don't Know". All that was expected was to tick the option that was descriptive of what they knew about HIV/AIDS. The question read as follows: "AIDS is a punishment for those who break God's law which says it is wrong to have sexual intercourse outside marriage"

### Procedure

Since the researcher could not be in all places at the same time, arrangement was made for university lecturers to be responsible for administering the questionnaire to their respective students. This was done after meeting what was expected of them by their institutions in administering such a questionnaire. The responding to the questionnaire was preceded by the lecturer concerned explaining to the participants what was expected of them. They

**Table 1.** Frequency percentage Chi-square and probability

No.	Country	Freq.	%	$\chi^2$	P
1	America N=58	54	93	94.5	0.01
2	Kenya N=102	52	51	14.5	0.01
3	Kenya (High School) N=157	78	57	29.7	0.01
4	South Africa N=164	92	56	43.5	0.01
5	Tanzania N=100	71	71	68	0.01

N = 581

were also advised that they had the choice of responding to the questionnaire, if they so wished. In addition to the statement, participants were to fill in their gender and date of birth. For the purpose of confidentiality, participants were not permitted to write their names or institution of affiliation. On completion of the questionnaire, the lecturers collected the papers which were sent to the researcher in New York for scoring and analysis.

## RESULTS

Descriptive statistics in the form of frequency, percentage, chi-square and probability were used as a method of data analysis as displayed in Table 1.

HIV/AIDS is a punishment for those who break God's law which says, it is wrong to have sex outside marriage. The response to the statement for America was 93%, Kenya high school 57%, Kenya university 51%, South Africa 56% and Tanzania 71% who did not go along with the statement that, HIV/AIDS was a penalty for breaking God's law. In terms of chi-square, the results were as follows:  $\chi^2$  (2df, N = 155) = 29.7, < p = 0.01, Kenya high school;  $\chi^2$  (2df, N = 100) = 14.5, < p = 0.01, Kenya university;  $\chi^2$  (2df, N = 162) = 43.5, < p = 0.01, South Africa;  $\chi^2$  (2df, N = 98) = 68, < p = 0.01, Tanzania;  $\chi^2$  (2df, N = 56) = 94.5, < p = 0.01 America. All the values of the chi-square were statistically significant in favour of those who rejected the statement that HIV/AIDS is a punishment from God for sexual immorality. In summary, the analysis of data showed that adolescents at high school level as well as at university level have a united stand that, HIV/AIDS is unrelated with God's wrath against sinners.

## DISCUSSION

The objective of this investigation was to find out the extent to which adolescents would confirm that HIV/AIDS is God's directive to have people punished for engaging in sexual behaviour outside wedlock. The results showed that the majority of participants in all the four diverse groups did not agree with the premise that God was indeed using HIV/AIDS as a plague to discipline sinners.

Such findings are in harmony with what other researchers have reported as well as those who have reported different findings. In terms of comparison and confirmation, a few findings will be cited.

Mbonu et al. (2009) present their case in the form of stigma against those who are infected and affected and that as a result, the infected encounter medical problems as well as social problems, particularly in human relations. Moreover, such stigma promotes secrecy and denial which ultimately are catalysts for transmission of HIV/AIDS; HIV/AIDS people are not eager to undergo tests, seeking care following diagnosis, quality of care provided to those who are HIV positive. Correctly interpreted, the argument advanced is in agreement with the findings of the present findings.

Similarly, Phiri (2004) takes the position that HIV/AIDS being interpreted as a directive from God for those engaged in sexual immorality ought to be rejected with the contempt it deserves. This is further confirmation of the present findings. Moreover, the present findings are in alignment with those of Houdmann (2013) who argues that even though all diseases, including HIV/AIDS, constitute a judgement from God; it is not for Christians to say a specific disease, such as HIV/AIDS is God's judgement. Instead, he proposes the approach of extending to the infected grace, love, mercy, forgiveness and compassion.

In contrast, the present findings are in disagreement with those of Barton (2012) who is of the view that science is unlikely to discover a cure for HIV/AIDS as this would be contrary to God's judgement over those who engage in the forbidden sexual behaviour outside the holy matrimony. Van Dyk and Van Dyk (2007) study in South Africa showed that 69% of the respondents did not agree with the statement and 16.7% were in support of the statement that HIV/AIDS is God's directive for sinners. This was contrary to what was observed in the present investigation. The findings of this investigation are in contrast to what has been reported by Manzell et al. (2011) and Smith (2004) who indicated that respondents categorically agreed with the concept of HIV/AIDS being God's wrath against sinners who take sexual intercourse as pleasure out of wedlock.

According to Dete (2012), HIV/AIDS people are stigmatised through negative attitudes towards them, reflected by those who are not accepted in churches, because they are living with HIV/AIDS; those who used to be members have been stripped of their membership, and those who held important office or played an important role in church activities have been denied of such roles. Since the findings of this investigation did not agree with the statement, they are in disagreement with the above maltreatment of religious organisations.

In summary, the findings of this study are a rejection of the statement that HIV/AIDS is God's judgement over

human beings who do not adhere to his commandment against sexual immorality. At the same time, the findings present a contrast to findings which are in support of the argument that the contrary holds true.

## CONCLUSION

People all over the world suffer from various ailments and diseases, but HIV/AIDS is singled out as a direct intervention from God. As it has been argued in the literature review, all ailments and diseases constitute judgement from God in response to human beings failing to adhere to his natural and spiritual laws. It is therefore paradoxical that HIV/AIDS is singled out as being God's wrath against man's sinful nature. As a result of such stance and belief, stigma is created against people suffering from HIV/AIDS, as a result of which their suffering is intensified and aggravated, as they feel isolated and denied of their rightful place in society. Instead of their being afforded compassion, care, love and forgiveness, they are perpetually condemned. This is cruel and devoid of human spirit of love and sense of belonging. As such, the tenet that God punishes people with HIV/AIDS must be rejected in favour of doing the best to relieve their suffering, and the concerted effort to find a cure for HIV/AIDS must continue unabated.

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