

Book Review

Petro, A.M. *After the Wrath of God: AIDS, Sexuality, and American Religion*. New York: Oxford University Press. 2015. ix + 294pp. \$29.95 ISBN 978-0-1993-9128-8

Anthony Petro, Assistant Professor of Religion at Boston University, uses his first book to trace how the intersecting discourses on AIDS, sexuality, and American religion constructed the AIDS crisis as a moral epidemic, rather than solely a viral one, in the USA. By problematising the oft-cited and dominant socio-historical narrative that pits the Christian Right against secular gay and lesbian activists as ideological polar opposites, Petro places these discussions in the broader historical, cultural, and political contexts manifest in the culture wars of the second half of the twentieth century. As the title of the book suggests, the author acknowledges the narrative in which conservative Christians have declared the AIDS epidemic to represent God's wrath and punishment of 'homosexuals' for America's moral shortcomings. However, Pedro complicates this by including the efforts and discussions of other religious social actors (liberal and evangelical Protestants, Catholic bishops, and lay parishioners), caregivers, public health workers, AIDS activists, and members of the queer community in response to the AIDS crisis. The book seeks to establish the emerging and competing discourses as they began to modify the wider contours of American sexual ethics, morality, and politics.

The book has four chapters. Following the socio-historical framework of morality, sexual citizenship, and the cultural landscape of Reagan-era politics in the introduction, Chapter 1 questions how rhetorical strategies shifted from the Christian Right's strict condemnation of homosexuals to a model in which conceptions of compassion would compel social actors to provide pastoral care and religious support to people with AIDS. These shifting frameworks and discussions are carried over into the next two chapters in order to consider questions of public health and ecclesiastical authority. Chapter 2 investigates Charles Everett

Koop's controversial 1981 appointment as Surgeon General and his subsequent public health efforts in handling the AIDS crisis. Koop invoked religious and moral responses to AIDS which dramatically intertwined politics, religion, and public health through the promotion of 'abstinence-only' education and heterosexual, monogamous sexuality. Chapter 3 takes a closer look at two Catholic Church publications in order to compare their rhetorical choices and the echoes of AIDS debates in the Church's hierarchy. The first publication controversially recognised condom use as a viable form of prevention in an America with pluralistic forms of sexuality and sex practices. Following the reactionary backlash to this stance, a second publication eliminated this language and further anchored the Church's traditional position by removing the pluralised vision in favour of a universal prescription of married, heterosexual, monogamous sex without condoms.

Chapter 4 provides an interesting example of the culminating social manifestations of the book's central debates. Petro discusses the 1989 'Stop the Church' protest during which AIDS activists disrupted services at St Patrick's Cathedral by infiltrating the church, distributing condoms and literature, voicing their complaints regarding official Church stances, and most controversially, by crumbling the holy host. This last provocative act, combined with the disruption of mass, brought negative attention to AIDS activists and the New York-based activist group AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power by depicting the Church as the victim of aggressive activists who infringed upon the attendees' rights to practice religion. This particular protest also added sparks to existing frictions, not only between supposedly secular queer activists and religious institutions but also among AIDS activists in general vis-à-vis their approach to activism, sexual ethics, and AIDS prevention. However, through their failure to garner support, the protestors inadvertently widened the ideological divide between American Catholics and gay AIDS activists.

2 Book Review

Largely a historical work, this book focuses on the period between the early 1980s and the mid-1990s and finds support in archival records, oral and documentary histories, books, pamphlets, and various media accounts for the emerging responses to AIDS and prevention methods. Petro positions the rhetorical framing of sexuality and safe-sex practices within the larger cultural and political landscape where themes of sexual education, abortion rights, same-sex sexual acts, and condom use were at the fore of American debates on sexual morality. The book's themes resonate with diverse disciplines of study including medical sociology and anthropology, religious studies, and gender and sexuality studies. That being said, the readership is not only limited to an academic audience; Petro's prose remains free of theoretically technical terminology which renders the text readily accessible.

The author is well aware of the book's limitations in that he selectively gives focus to debates

on AIDS, sexuality, and religion insofar as they concern queer communities and American forms of Christianity. As he notes, this choice inevitably overshadows other religions and discussions concerning drug use and sex work that pertain to AIDS. However, the book's strengths come from its well-documented historiography of the construction of AIDS as a moral epidemic through overlapping discourses following the emergence of AIDS in the USA. The book's afterword reminds us, through its discussions of same-sex marriage and the ever-growing interest for PrEP (pre-exposure prophylaxis) as a method for HIV prevention, that AIDS has indelibly changed the ways in which we think about sexual morality, and we continue to live with these social ramifications today.

Michael Deml
University of Geneva, Geneva