The Interaction of Religion and Spirituality in the Lives of HIV-positive Individuals

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With the introduction of highly active anti-retroviral drug treatment (HAART) in the mid-1990s, HIV/AIDS evolved from being a death sentence to a chronic disease in the minds of most Americans. However, this drug regimen can be extremely challenging to maintain and is not available with equal access globally. Additionally, HIV is still an extremely difficult disease to negotiate and significant emotional support is required to continue to fight the disease.

For many African-Americans, the church is an important source of such support, however given HIV’s origins in the gay community it has not been openly discussed in churches due to its taboo sexual connotation and few churches have resources available for their HIV-positive congregants. Nonetheless, like with most chronic diseases, spirituality and faith are one of the most common coping mechanisms among HIV-positive individuals. This research explores the ways in which personal spirituality and public religion interact in the context of HIV care for African-Americans in the St. Louis community.

This analysis of the current situation in St. Louis has been shaped greatly by ethnographic interviews with public health officials, religious clergy, and HIV/AIDS specialists in the non-profit sector as well as my observation at several local HIV-related nonprofits. As this research continues, I hope to begin to bridge the gap between the biomedical and spiritual components of care and better understand how disease is embodied in order to develop better approaches to caring for the whole person.