

Dangerous Liaisons

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Antigay Americans are losing the culture war, so they're exporting hatred to Uganda [1], Zimbabwe, and Nigeria — where their fervor is so welcome it threatens to sweep the entire continent.

Death sentences in Nigeria. Prison terms in Malawi. Violent, homophobic rhetoric spewed by dictators in Zimbabwe and Gambia. Perhaps nowhere on earth are gays persecuted more than in Africa — ground zero for a culture war waged by U.S. religious and political leaders. Through the lens of the missionary hotbed that is Uganda, Jeff Sharlet, author of *C Street: The Fundamentalist Threat to American Democracy*, reports on the deadly consequences of evangelicals' antigay exports.

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At the airport into Entebbe, the gateway for flights in and out of Uganda, near the capital city of Kampala, I recently met Tommy and Teresa Harris, a pair of American missionaries. She had friendly brown curls; he wore a salt-and-pepper sea captain's beard. You could tell they were missionaries because their shirts said so: "Faithful Servant" was stitched on the breast pocket of his khaki safari gear and across her bright white T-shirt. That was the name of their ministry in Uganda. "Going home?" I asked.

"Oh, no," Tommy said, his voice jumpy and Georgian. "We're just going to get more money."

"Mm-hmm," Teresa concurred. It was May 2010. They'd been "in country" since 2002, when Tommy received a message from God directing him to Uganda. Nigeria, the continent's most populous country, may send more preachers abroad to fill the pulpits of American churches (including at times those of Sarah Palin's in Alaska and Ted Haggard's former church in Colorado), and Rwanda may be officially designated the world's first "Purpose-Driven Nation" — after the best-selling book by pastor Rick Warren — but Uganda is special missionary bait. It's where the revival that launched born-again Christianity across the region in 1935 began. Fred Hartley, whose Atlanta-based College of Prayer claims nearly two dozen "campuses" in half a dozen African countries — all dedicated to teaching American-style evangelicalism to the continent's leaders — told me that Uganda is the premier site for "spiritual war" in the world right now.

"Spiritual war" is a theological term, but in Uganda — ground zero for an explosion in violent homophobia across Africa — it's taking increasingly concrete form. For the Ugandan government, that's a pragmatic strategy as much as a spiritual one. Since 1986, Uganda has been ruled by an autocrat, Yoweri Museveni, who correctly guessed that American evangelicals eager to do good works and to save the heathen could be a big source of income for his regime.

"We have a primary, a secondary, and a high school," Tommy said of Faithful Servants International

Ministries. "Four hundred and fifty children, two meals a day, and we go into two hospitals and three prisons. We can't do all that ourselves of course, so we have nine ministers. And our own seminary!"

"There are 54 employees," Teresa said.

"Sure are," Tommy replied. He was proud of their size but he liked to be nimble. "My thing is witnessing. Going to the villages and telling them about Jesus." Uganda is overwhelmingly Christian, but that doesn't stop Americans from trying to make it more so. A landlocked country with a population of 32 million and the second-highest birth rate in the world, it looms large in the American evangelical imagination: a project for purification, a case study in revival to be held up as a model back home. "Ten thousand souls were saved last year," Tommy said. He meant through his efforts alone.

"What do you make of this Anti-Homosexuality Bill?" I asked. It was one of the hottest debates in the country, and a rare occasion when Uganda made international news. Said to be inspired by Americans, the bill would make homosexuality a crime punishable by death or life in prison. But Tommy heard only the word "homosexuality."

"I do not believe in homosexuality!" he said, rearing up with indignation as if I'd just put a hand on his knee. "Absolutely not!" He crossed his arms over his burly chest.

"Of course," I said, "of course."

Teresa rubbed his shoulder. "Shh," she said. "I don't think that's what he meant."

I explained that I was interested in their view of the death penalty for homosexuality. Tommy shook his head. Tough one.

"Well, I'm totally against killing them. Because some of them can be saved, and changed. But the thing is, you can't force them to stop. It's been tried! But it don't work." He shook his head over the problem on all sides — the homosexuals, themselves, and his Ugandan friends, so on fire for the gospel that they'd gone too far in an antigay crusade. That's how it is with Ugandans, he explained. They're a bighearted people, but they get ahead of themselves sometimes. That's where Americans could help.

"What they need," Tommy proposed, "is a special place, like, for people doing homosexual things to learn different. A camp, like."

"Keep them all in one place?" I asked.

"Yes. I think that's what we have to try," he said. "Because the thing is, the Bible says we can't kill them. And we can't put them in prison because that'd be like putting a normal fella in a whorehouse!" Teresa chuckled with her husband. A camp in which to concentrate the offenders — that was the compassionate solution.

P.S.

* From Advocate.com:

http://www.advocate.com/Print_Issue/Cover_Stories/Dangerous_Liaisons/

Footnotes

[1] See [Anti-Gay Fervor in Uganda Tied to Right-Wing US Evangelicals](#)