

BOOK REVIEW

The U.S. Christian Right and Pro-Family Politics in 21st Century Africa

By Haley McEwen. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, Springer Nature, 2024. xiv+144 pp. \$49.99 hardcover, \$34.99 e-book.

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The *U.S. Christian Right* has been a force in American politics for decades, but it is only quite recently that it has targeted sub-Saharan Africa. Interest in the region was stimulated for the *U.S. Christian Right* during the presidency of Barack Obama (2009–2017) when his administration’s foreign policy supported human rights for sexual minorities, including for LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender, questioning/queer) individuals and communities in sub-Saharan Africa and elsewhere. The subsequent Trump presidency sought to overturn Obama’s policies in these regards and the *U.S. Christian Right* was an enthusiastic participant in these efforts, including in relation to sub-Saharan Africa.

McEwen’s book is a timely, as well as exhaustive, account of the “imperial” expansion of the *U.S. Christian Right* into sub-Saharan Africa as a fundamental aspect of its global crusade to protect “family values.” McEwen’s well-researched book began life as a PhD thesis and it is evident that the thesis was turned into a book with little in the way of revision. There are copious discussions of the issues comprising the “family values” agenda, with numerous sources cited in order to take the narrative forward.

It seems that the book is mainly the product of “desk research.” McEwen does not seem to have interviewed any of the protagonists she profusely refers to, whether among the numerous *U.S. Christian Right* organizations she identifies nor among their “target audiences” in sub-Saharan Africa. This is a pity; the book relies (over)-much on secondary sources and the account would likely have been more authoritative—and interesting—if the author had taken the trouble to talk to some of the people involved in the issues she discusses, both in the United States and in sub-Saharan Africa.

McEwen makes no attempt to define the Christian Right and does not seek to explain where the “Christian” part of their title comes from, and why it is significant in their policies. This is an omission given that many of the arguments that are representative of the *U.S. Christian Right* derive from explicitly Christian concerns.

McEwen explains that the *U.S. Christian Right* decries liberal values, including those exhibited by prominent liberal international Christian organizations. Such a focus was apparent from the late 1970s and in the 1980s, when the World Council of Churches faced opposition to its human rights work during the transition from colonialism to postcolonialism and from white minority rule to popular rule in southern Africa. Prominent in this regard were the governments of South Africa, Portugal, and the United States, which invoked Christian conservative themes in support of groups allegedly battling “godless communism,” which, critics believed, was a cover for more general opposition to development of modern human rights in the region. The most resolute on-the-ground resistance came from American evangelical missionaries, whose numbers were rapidly expanding in sub-Saharan Africa and in many other areas of the Global South. American conservative evangelicals, a key component of the *U.S. Christian Right*, were in the forefront of opposition to liberal and left-wing religious groups in southern Africa, just as they were contemporaneously in the United States. A diffuse network of evangelicals provided public support for anti-communist military organizations in sub-Saharan Africa, and some are believed to have sent military aid to anti-communist rebels.

For her account of the *U.S. Christian Right*'s activities from the late 1990s in several sub-Saharan African countries, including Kenya, Uganda, and Nigeria, McEwen is heavily indebted to the work of a Zambian scholar, Rev. Dr. Kapya Kaoma, one of a very few researchers to have looked in depth at the activities of the *U.S. Christian Right* in sub-Saharan Africa. Over time, McEwen explains, the *U.S. Christian Right* has expanded its sub-Saharan African operations, most recently turning its attention to Ghana from the late 2010s.

The key entry point of the *U.S. Christian Right* in Ghana, and in sub-Saharan Africa more generally, was contestation of LGBTQ+ rights, whereby all advocates—both pro- and anti-gay rights—incorporate the language of human rights in distinctive and/or novel ways. Advocates from the *U.S. Christian Right* emphasize, among other values, rights, the traditional family, and culture, in opposition to the liberalization of African sexual norms. McEwen, following Kaoma, notes that the *U.S. Christian Right* agenda is heavily informed by “movement intellectuals,” rather than “movement activists,” who seek to mobilize congregations and faith-based actors. Western advocates for liberalization, on the other hand, emphasize the human rights of equality, inclusion, dignity, and individual freedom. McEwen explains that both are counter-movements to each other, heavily influenced by both local African and global factors.

McEwen's relatively brief book—142 pages of text and references, plus a very concise two-page index—is divided into five chapters, plus an introduction and conclusion. Chapter two describes the history of the *U.S. Christian Right*'s activities in sub-Saharan Africa. Chapter three is concerned with McEwen's methodology. Chapters four, five, and six examine, respectively, the *U.S. Christian Right*'s campaigns in sub-Saharan African countries against sexual and reproductive health rights, LGBTQ+ rights, and comprehensive sexuality education. The concluding chapter sums up the findings of the book.

Overall, the book is a welcome, albeit limited, attempt to quantify the activities of the *U.S. Christian Right* in sub-Saharan Africa over the last few decades. It would be

read with profit and interest by anyone interested in the recent activities of the *U.S. Christian Right* in sub-Saharan Africa. On the minus side, the book is not forthcoming about how and why so many Africans are persuaded by the *U.S. Christian Right* to advocate for and in some cases adopt local policies which are antipathetic to the human rights of significant sections of their populations, including sexual minorities.