

DEATHLY DOCTRINE

Christian Churches and AIDS

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Introduction

AIDS, as it has developed these last 12 years, is not so much a disease as it is an ideology. AIDS has been an epidemic, but it has been an epidemic of grants, funds, monies spent on research, prevention, education and care, and theological definition and redefinition, even more than it has been an epidemic of *deaths* of a certain sort.[1] Every disease has always been a social and cultural phenomenon a phenomenon of *meaning* at the same moment that it has been a phenomenon of health and dying [2]. But the meaning given AIDS has become mythic almost heroic; this quality is witnessed by the spectacular scale on which AIDS is visibly made to appear. As we will discuss below, the funding of AIDS is quite disproportionate with its epidemiological significance; but more than just the money spent on AIDS, there exists a social and religious imperative to give visibility to AIDS. AIDS is made thusly visible in media representations, only a small part of which are occupied with actual public health information; in highly publicised memorials such as the 'AIDS Quilt' which instances the number of deaths in its very physical presence (a presence which would, of course, be vastly overshadowed by an hypothetical 'Cancer Quilt' or 'Automobile-fatality Quilt'); and also in carving out *special* religious and ethical categories for AIDS, apart from the generic of 'disease'. AIDS, more than other diseases particularly lends itself to hermeneutic appropriation by Christian churches.

Several characteristics transform AIDS, an acquired immunodeficiency, into *the* fascinating disease for all kinds of churches and religions. Two have already been mentioned: Death and money. Another is the fact that AIDS is probably a primarily *sexually* acquired disease. Ten years into the epidemic, it has become clear that in the Western world the overwhelming majority of those dying of AIDS belong to a Christian category of sinners: gay men (and IV drug user, who make up most of the rest don't fall into any great favor of Christian churches themselves). For instance in the USA by the end of 1992, 85% of all persons with AIDS were either gay men, or iv drug user, or both.[3] AIDS in Australia is a nearly exclusively male disease: 97.2% of all persons with AIDS in this country are males [4] which suggests an even greater concentration amongst gay-men than in the USA. The situation in Europe is not fundamentally different.[5] It has become obvious that the predicted heterosexual AIDS epidemic has not happened, and is highly unlikely to materialize.[6]

The picture of AIDS is hence one of a highly visible, well-funded disease, generally fatal, affecting primarily homosexuals. Religious groups and organizations have traditionally been interested in all of these issues: what after all, could be of greater theological richness than a disease so thoroughly saturated in deviance, sin and death?

(Homo)Sexuality and Christians

AIDS and male homosexuality are connected in the sense that AIDS is primarily a gay male disease. The converse is not entailed: the vast majority of gay men are not at risk for AIDS diseases.[7] It is no secret that Christians consider homosexuality bad or evil.[8] For most Christians homosexuality is a sin, and homosexuals are sinners. For this prescription, and others of its sort, Christians rely on their certainty of God's existence; and their knowledge of His wishes. God's views are considered morally binding for humans.[9] Before we discuss a number of religious positions on AIDS, it is necessary to get a rough understanding of these institutions' views on homosexuality.

The origins of Christian condemnation of homosexuality are diverse and multiple. However, a confluence of social and theological traditions had created in the Christian consciousness an uniquely vitriolic condemnation of homosexuality by the start of the 13th century a tradition first formalized in the Third Lateran Council of 1179 [10]; and this tradition has remained with us until today in most Christian churches. Much of the basis of this condemnation arises of the widespread 12th century use of the normative concept *Nature*, which has its roots in the pagan mythology of the goddess *Natura* which in turn entered into a Thomistic synthesis with the then recently rediscovered biological texts of Aristotle. Armed with a prescriptive concept of *Nature* Christians since the 12th century have found in that canonical document officially established with the Council of Trent in 1546 'The Bible' numerous sections actively condemning homosexuality and homosexuals. It is mostly in relation to this interpreted concept of 'Nature' or 'naturalness' that Christians today condemn homosexual behavior.

'The Bible' contains a number of writings from different authors over several hundreds of years, which Christians believe are unified in expressing the same message of God. The message is clear to them: Thou shalt not lie with mankind, as with womankind: it is abomination" [Leviticus 18:22, King James Version, and henceforth]

[11]. The penalty for such a behavior, which is committed on a regular basis by approximately 10% of the sexually active population [12] is not insignificant: If a man also lie with mankind, as he lieth with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination: they shall surely be put to death; their blood shall be upon them"[Leviticus 20:13]. Under the modern interpretation of the 'Bible', using a prescriptive and thoroughly non-descriptive use of the term 'nature', homosexuals are said to 'engage in unnatural acts' [Romans 1:26-7].[13],[14] These sinners will fail to reach every Christians goal, the 'Kingdom of God', the promised life after death [Corinthians I 6:9- 10, Timothy I 1:10].[15] Recently, the Catholic Church has expanded on these teachings by explicitly intervening on numerous occasions (especially in the USA) against laws that prohibit discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. [16]

Gay Christians have attempted to reinterpret the 'Bible' in an attempt to remain good Christians without changing their sexual orientation.[17] Reformers have gone so far as to declare the church's views on homosexuality a 'sin'. For instance John McNeill a former Jesuit priest who lost his job because of his homosexuality stated in a recent interview: There is no question that the Vatican's stance and opposition is objectively sinful. "[18] Interestingly, gay believers use the same non-scientific language and analytical frameworks to support their case as does their adversary, the official church does. Reverend J. Robert Williams, a gay priest of the US Episcopal Church has stated in a speech that Mother Theresa should have sex and called monogamy as unnatural as celibacy.[19] These attempts by gay Christians remind us of beagles arguing with a vivisectionist about a certain experiment to be done on them: it is unlikely that these gay Christians have any chance of convincing official Christianity.

The 'Bible' is a logically incoherent collection of statements made in different centuries; in order to cope with this problem Christian churches most especially Catholicism have established institutions which have interpretive monopolies on the 'Bible'. As pope John Paul II stated to an AIDS conference: "the church is the [only] correct interpreter of the Divine Laws".[20] The Catholic Church's interpretations of the above mentioned quotations on same-sex relations have been in effect for at least the last 600 years, as Boswell has shown;[21] effecting change in this longstanding doctrine seems unlikely.

Although the Catholic church has moved away from a strict death penalty for Sodomites, that their condemnation remains is unambiguous. Homosexuality is a grave transgression of the divine will" writes J.F. Harvey in the Catholic University of America's *New Catholic Encyclopedia*. In Harvey's view people who have only a tendency toward homosexuality (in that they have erotic dreams, day dreaming, and unintended urges) are free of

guilt, unless they give truly free consent." Only the latter action, he opines, involves moral guilt.[22] Unimpressed by the fact that conversion 'therapies' have failed so far to convert homosexuals into heterosexuals, and by the fact that professionals consider these 'therapies' as unethical [23], Harvey presents us with precise proposals on how to convert a homosexual. Among his recommendations are to impress homosexuals with the divine purpose of suffering in every life," to drag them into certain ascetical activities every day," some form of meditation for at least 20 minutes a day, Mass and Communion as often as possible during the week, daily examination of conscience," and so on.

If Harvey's wasn't a Catholic recipe for the conversion of a homosexual into a heterosexual, but a program of a smaller religious sect, it can safely be assumed, that Christian counsellors and the public would denounce such a program as a brain washing enterprise. Joachim Piegsa in a paper, condemning the utilitarian, hedonistic 'sex ideology' states bluntly:

On the basis of this sex ideology quite a number of psychiatrists refuse to acknowledge that there exists abnormal, addicted behavior in the area of sexuality, too. Any abnormality is defined in terms of the 'failure to choose the proper partner', which can reach different degrees. It starts with pedophilia, continues with homosexuality, exhibitionism, fetishism, with necrophilia and coprophilia, and extends to the destruction of the partner in the sexual murder.[24]

The suggestion of a smooth and continuous progression from pedophilia, with an intermediate worsening at homosexuality between consenting adults, to sexually motivated murder, makes clear just how Catholics evaluate homosexuality.[25]

Christians and AIDS

We may summarize the facts mentioned so far: i) The vast majority of persons with AIDS in the Western world are gay men and IV drug users. ii) Gay sexuality is a 'sin', and the 'sinner' deserves death (or another harsh penalty) for his crime against God's will.[26] Patricia Jacobi has observed:

The fatal nature of AIDS ..., and its association with sexual and illegal activities make AIDS a concern not only for [churches directly]... Some physicians with fundamentalist beliefs have [also] openly proposed a direct relationship between sinful behavior ... and AIDS. These physicians attribute the virus's 'birth' to a supernatural, teleological response to sinful practices.[27]

When AIDS started to look like a threat not just to the well-being of some gay men but to what is called the 'general population', most newspapers published one front-page article after another on the epidemic which was

expected to materialize any moment. The Christian hierarchy have probably accepted 'the myth of heterosexual AIDS', as Michael Fumento called it in his book of that title [28], even more than have lay-people. A report informs us [29] that an Irish conference of high-ranking church officials ('Bishops') was better informed than anyone else in the world about the epidemiology of AIDS diseases in this country in 1987. They claimed to know that Ireland was on the edge of an AIDS epidemic." In reality, the facts entirely contradict the beliefs of the Bishops: Ireland never was, is not, and probably will not face an AIDS epidemic.[30] When fear exists and modern science is unable to provide an immediate successful answer to a threat, religious groups and institutions fill the lacuna with their theological analyses and solutions.

A staff member of the British Anglican Church, Reverend Clements concluded in 1987: In the light of an unprejudiced reading of the Bible, it has to be said, that such assurances [that AIDS is not 'God's' punishment for 'sinful' lifestyle] are misplaced. Disease is explicitly mentioned as a consequence of disobeying God's law." [31] B. Napier, chairman of the Christian Research Institute has an even deeper insight into the possibility of the control of AIDS to offer: AIDS is a brand new disease to humans. The virus is one of a family of four; the other three affect animals only. Significantly, the only effective control of the virus in animals is slaughter." [32] The Bishop of Birmingham, Hugh Montefiore reminds us that

[T]hose who indulge in immoral sex are breaking God's law and are therefore at much greater risk of contracting the disease. Unchastity is contrary to the natural law and it is not therefore surprising that human bodies are often ill-adapted to it, as evidence by the spread of the AIDS virus shows." [33]

Doctor of Theology Russell Nelson, a senior Mormon Church official considers AIDS as a plague abetted by the immoral." [34] A high ranking representative of the Catholic Church, Cardinal Hume wrote in an editorial for the London Times: AIDS is better seen as a proof for the general law that actions have consequences and that disorder inevitably damages and then destroys." [35] The German Catholic Church engages in this language of damnation as well. Joseph Höffner, the former Cardinal of Cologne, commented We call the sickness a wrath of God. This is also the case with AIDS." [36]

The primarily sexually acquired immunodeficiency AIDS has been used by Christian churches as a proof that their teachings on homosexuality are correct, and that those suffering from AIDS (if they belong to the risk group of gay men) are penalized for their immoral behavior. In fact, by aggravating the incidence of AIDS, Christian churches act circularly to create the very disease they whose spread they use as vindication of their theology. Church responses

to AIDS prevention education differ markedly from scientific public health policies. Realizing that most sexually active teenagers and adults have sex with more than one partner, and that they have sex before and outside marriage (as evidenced by dramatic increases in the epidemiology of sexually transmitted diseases in the last 20 years [37]), the professional and commonsense recommendation has been to reduce the risk of acquiring disease to a minimum through the use of condoms. [38] However, the Catholic Church's disapproval of artificial means of birth control has led it to block the distribution, and discourage the use, of condoms for the prevention of sexually transmitted diseases, including AIDS presumably lest they fall into the hands of those seeking to avoid pregnancy.

Catholic Professor of Philosophy Giorgio Giannini said in the *Universe* a British Christian paper: To confront the disease of the century with condoms signifies an attitude which not even minimally cures moral aspects. Compromise and morals cannot go together, the only remedy against AIDS is abstinence." [39] Similarly, in Germany, the German Bishops' Conference criticized in a press release an AIDS education campaign of the Bundeszentrale für gesundheitliche Aufklärung (Federal Center for Health Awareness"). [40] Pope John Paul II states, The abuse of sexuality has a tendency to promote the spread of disease." He considers the use of condoms a severe violation of the personal dignity and therefore morally prohibited." The victims of AIDS are quickly declared mentally ill: One is not far from the truth if one says that parallel to the spread of AIDS, a kind of immunodeficiency has arisen on the level of the life-values, which can be quite accurately characterized as a illness of the mind." [41]

The Catholic Church opposes the use of condoms as a means of halting the spread of AIDS. This extends so far as preventing Catholic hospitals from the participation in AIDS awareness and education weeks, which are regular institutions in many US cities. [42] In the Philippines, with its overwhelmingly Catholic population, the government battles its very own fight to get AIDS prevention messages across to the people, against aggressive attacks from Roman Catholic Cardinal Jaime Sin. Sin declares that the government is sacrificing moral values to solve the country's problems." [43] John Paul II, at a recent tour through the slums of Uganda, stated at a rally of about 30,000 young people, Chastity is the only way to put an end to the tragic plague of AIDS." [44] This undermines efforts of US-government funded efforts in Kampala to promote the use of condoms to thwart the spread of AIDS. In fairness, not all Christian churches so disregard human lives: Terry Lynch, executive director of the Downtown Cluster of Congregations supports the plan of Washington D.C. to distribute condoms in schools. He said

the plan is saving lives. That's the bottom line." [45] But Lynch's opinions represent a small minority of Christian churches.

One might wonder whether the Christian teachings discussed have any consequences in our daily lives given, for example, that the church's opposition to contraceptives is largely ignored by most of its membership in the Western world. Unfortunately, scientific research has shown Christian opinion to have a palpably harmful effect. Conservative religious views tend to lead to fear, prejudice, and discrimination toward AIDS sufferers concludes a study which analyzed the determinants of fear of AIDS among Australian college students. Greater knowledge is associated with lower fear of AIDS. The stepwise analysis indicated that more frequent church attendance was associated with higher fear of AIDS." [46] This finding is not isolated; a number of other studies come to similar conclusions: The American students' homophobia bias and reaction scores were higher than those of the French students. The latter findings were interpreted with reduced effects of conservative, orthodox religion in France." [47] Religious fundamentalism is the most important factor leading to intolerance for those who suffer from AIDS. [48] Furthermore, the influence of Christian ideology on gay Christians with AIDS itself reduces the quality of life these people experience. Franks [49] found that higher death anxiety in the men with AIDS was associated with greater church attendance." They explained this finding this way: gay Christians with AIDS seek yet fail in their attempt to find solace through the doctrine of formal religion and their associated views of life after death." [50]

Death

Christian efforts in the AIDS crisis have not particularly been directed towards the control or elimination of AIDS-related deaths, but rather towards the management of such deaths within the framework of Christian theology, and for the conceptualization of such deaths. Even those churches which, unlike the Catholic Church, do not theologially oppose every reasonable epidemiological measure relevant to reducing the risk of AIDS transmission are still primarily concerned to bring people with AIDS back *into the fold*, and to cure their moral sickness of the soul." [51] For example, while the Catholic Church bans its hospitals from distributing safe sex" information, in New York, Catholic institutions provide 36% of nursing home care for AIDS patients." [52] Besides providing dying lessons in Catholic theology one might reasonably say indoctrination to AIDS patients, these hospitals receive considerable governmental funding for each patient, and for them AIDS was a financial boom." [53]

In New York City (Manhattan) alone there are at least thirty ministries established explicitly for this purpose of

Christianizing the dying. [54] The Christian fetishization of death is not unique to AIDS, of course; just examine the sort of cloyish affection so universally heaped upon a Mother Theresa for her association with the dying (including her various AIDS hospices). But with AIDS, the clearest conflict arises between churches' theological doctrines and the lifestyles and values of the dying. For lepers or malaria sufferers the churches can vacantly celebrate the innocence of their poverty and unsanitary conditions, but to persons with AIDS the church proclaims, in the voice of New York's Cardinal O'Conner, forgiveness of sins includes (giving up) a life-style not acceptable to God." [55]

Christian attitudes about AIDS differ somewhat, of course. Whether AIDS is seen as a symbol of spiritual pollution or moral decay rather than a matter of public health," [56] or simply the *result* of such 'sin',

the disease is usually discussed in relation to millenarian beliefs, sexual mores, magical approaches to illness, and the strengthening or definition of the boundaries between the religious group and the larger society. Each group uses AIDS as a symbol to reinforce its own standards of sexual behavior and ideal of family life. [57]

Wallack [58] has provided some evidence that religious people, for all the reasons discussed, are just not the ideal persons to care for people with AIDS. Wallack remarks, The attitudes toward providing clinical care to homosexual AIDS patients appeared to be associated with religion... Protestant and Catholic respondents were more likely than Jewish respondents to express discomfort examining homosexual patient." One in ten respondents (of all staff of a large metropolitan hospital in Manhattan) agreed that AIDS is God's punishment to homosexuals, 6% agreed that patients who choose a homosexual life-style deserve to get AIDS." [59] We feel certain that Christian hospitals, whose staff believes these prejudices by theological dictate, to contain such dicta with much more prevalence than will secular hospitals.

We cannot help but question the appropriateness of state subsidies of such millenarian beliefs, and theological sexual mores. This for at least two reasons: Firstly, their efforts are often in *direct* contradiction of scientifically guided epidemiological procedures; and secondly their understanding of care is more often than not contrary to the best interest of persons with AIDS.

Money

AIDS research has been, financially, the largest medical project ever undertaken, especially in the USA, but to a lesser extent throughout the industrial world. Even in the US, where universal medical care is not guaranteed, AIDS treatment is state funded to a large extent, though the poor who die of other causes largely go without medical

treatment. In nations where medical care is universally provided to citizens, treatment does not exhibit such a discrepancy; but such a difference does appear in funding for education, research and prevention. We focus on the US, where the funding for AIDS is most concentrated.

For each AIDS death reported in the USA in 1990, the government spent \$53,745 in research and education. That's more than 15 times the \$3,241 spent per cancer death and about 58 times the \$922 per death parceled out to researchers fighting heart disease.[60] The Federal budget for AIDS in America was, in 1990, higher than the budget for cancer, which killed more than 12 times as many people in 1989, and much higher than that for heart disease, the nation's top killer.[61] The US Centers for Disease Control spent over \$800 million in 1991 on AIDS *research*, and considerably more when education and treatment are included.[62] AIDS Funding has continued to increase since 1991 in proportion to funding of other diseases. In 1993, the Congress approved a record \$2.5 billion spending package for AIDS prevention and research."[63] Of this, About \$1.3 billion in the package is expected to be used for AIDS research by the National Institutes of Health. The amount exceeds 1993 levels by about \$225 million."[64] Funding for other diseases has remained stable or even decreased during the period when AIDS funding has increased.

A significant proportion of AIDS funds are directed through Christian, particularly Catholic institutions. Where such direction of funds occurs, epidemiologically sound procedures are abandoned to theological dictates. Often enough government simply gives way in its regulated procedures to accommodate such Christian theology, as in New York State in 1991 where Catholic nursing homes refused to accept state guidelines about AIDS prevention counselling.[65] Naturally, these violating nursing homes continue(d) to receive funding from the government. In fact about 1,800 churches nationwide (in the USA) have AIDS relief and education programs, making the religious community the second largest provider of AIDS-related services outside the government."[66] While the

confidentiality of the records of private organizations makes it difficult to find an exact breakdown of the proportion of the funding of these religious AIDS-programs which comes from government sources, it is clear that the portion is substantial.

Conclusion

The influence of Christian ideology and Christian institutions on AIDS education and prevention is harmful in that it undermines realistic approaches undertaken by public health authorities in secular societies. Furthermore we provided some evidence for the claim that Christian churches, especially the Catholic Church, agitate and try to indoctrinate persons with AIDS in their hospitals and hospices. It abuses its unique position as one of the biggest care providers for religious propaganda. The consequences for the psychological well-being of gay men and IV drug users with AIDS are far from salutary. These facts suggest to us the need for maintenance of a strict separation of state and church. The elimination of Christian influence in all areas of AIDS education and prevention is another important goal. Finally, it is recommended that all funding for Christian institutions providing care for persons with AIDS stop as fast as possible. The money spent for their work could better be given either to public hospitals, or more appropriately to self-organizations of persons with AIDS. *

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References

References not included here to save paper. See the complete paper for references:
<http://www.virusmyth.com/aids/hiv/dmchurch.htm>