

## WHAT DOES GOD HAVE TO DO WITH IT?

# The meaning of AIDS

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**T**he title of the U.S. Catholic bishops' document, "The Many Faces of AIDS," highlights what a multifaceted disease we are up against. AIDS is an illness, an epidemic, a killer, a threat, a news event, a mystery. In its commingling of sex, death, and drugs, AIDS strikes fear and fascination into our hearts. Our reactions to AIDS are complex and often anything but level-headed. The social phenomenon of AIDS breaks down our minds' defense systems and gives free rein to the deep-seated fears of even the most well-adjusted among us. AIDS is the great American Rorschach test, a dark blot whose interpretations may say more about the interpreter than about the picture being interpreted.

A recent Times Mirror Gallup Poll revealed that 42.5 percent of those sur-

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veyed think that AIDS might be a punishment from God for immoral sexual behavior (*Newsweek*, February 1, 1988). Presumably, about 57.5 percent find that pretty hard to believe. How could anyone see the hand of God in the pain of human beings? What about the people who acquired AIDS from blood transfusions or while in the womb? Is the fact that lesbians are currently the lowest risk group for AIDS a sign of God's favor?

And yet for the 42.5 percent who said yes, the connection may seem obvious. Since the question asked whether AIDS might be a punishment from God, isn't it outrageously presumptuous to suggest that God has nothing to do with AIDS? Didn't God send the angel of death to kill the firstborn of the Egyptians when the pharaoh refused to let God's people go? Didn't C.S. Lewis explain how pain can come as a gift from God to move us from sin to grace? Is it simply a coincidence that the two highest risk groups, non-monogamous homosexuals and intravenous drug abusers, are engaged in

activities that traditionally carry the admonishment of religious authorities?

It is clear that the social phenomenon of AIDS raises not just ethical questions but fundamental theological questions. Even the poll results are as interesting for what they suggest about people's attitudes toward God as for what they suggest about people's attitudes toward AIDS.

A reading of some of the popular literature on the ultimate meaning of AIDS reveals a complex picture. There are as many positions about how God acts in the world and, consequently, what AIDS means, as there are commentators. Each commentator is operating with basic theological presuppositions, whether explicit or implicit. An examination of several approaches to the question of how God acts in the world will serve as a vehicle for introducing some current literature about the meaning of AIDS.

The following models are intended to provide a general backdrop against which to understand the presuppositions

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of various interpretations of AIDS in its relationship to God. They are not intended to be either inclusive of all possible positions or free of overlap. The terms "interventionist" and "intentional" are taken from John Shea's *Stories of God* (Thomas More Press, 1978), though what Shea means by them differs somewhat from my usage here.

Beliefs about AIDS and Divine Activity:

● **Interventionist.** Stresses divine omnipotence, with an emphasis on God's occasional breaking into the natural order of things to accomplish special purposes.

This approach underlies the position of Charles Stanley, former president of the Southern Baptist Convention. Stanley is quoted in the *Los Angeles Times* (January 24, 1986) saying, "AIDS is God indicating his displeasure toward a sinful lifestyle."

Why would Stanley say this?

Imagine that you believe the Bible is inspired by God in a way that it is factually inerrant. You read the stories of God wiping out the world of Noah, putting plagues upon the Egyptians, sending the Israelites into captivity, striking dead Ananias and Sapphira, and on and on. You know well that God's wrath can be made manifest in this life and that justice is thereby done. You know also that in your fundamentalist reading of the Bible homosexual behavior is consistently and clearly condemned.

From this perspective it would be silly not to suspect strongly that God is directly behind AIDS. The argument that some victims are clearly "innocent" is unconvincing, for the Scriptures put no constraints upon God to have everything work out justly in this life. That the punishment of one group spills over onto others does not mean that God cannot be the cause.

● **Natural Consequences.** Believes that God is the primary cause of all, but there exist secondary chains of causality. Divine justice is structured into the universe such that ultimately one pays the price of one's transgressions.

This approach can be found in the position of Gene Antonio in *The AIDS Cover-Up? The Real and Alarming Facts about AIDS* (Ignatius Press, 1986).

Antonio draws a connection between the onset of AIDS and the widespread violations of biblical injunctions against homosexuality and bestiality. He chastises the "self-appointed prophets of nihilism and pansexual libertinism who have succeeded in fostering the conditions leading to the biological and social downfall of society. . . . With AIDS, the horrendous physiological consequences of their deathstyle can no longer be concealed." Antonio laments that "the Pied Pipers of the homosexual liberation movement have led hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, of young bathhouse habitués to an impending AIDS death."

Similar presuppositions are reflected in the position taken by the Vatican representative to the United Nations, Archbishop Justo Mullor, in a speech given to the World Health Organization in May, 1987 when he said that AIDS, although not directly caused by God, is the result of disturbances in human ecology due to a "suicidal permissiveness geared to anarchistic pleasures." This manifests one way of understanding: what you sow you reap. The universe is structured in such a way that sooner or later you will pay; official Catholic teaching is clear about the immorality of homosexual activity and drug abuse.

As with the interventionist position, it is not logically necessary that there be a one-to-one correspondence between those who are "guilty" and those who are punished. It is only necessary that there be a fairly high correlation. God is not directly zapping people. Secondary causes are at work in such a way as to



achieve the ultimate ends of divine providence.

A New Age interpretation of AIDS, which is something of the flip side of Antonio and Mullor's positions, is claimed to have been "channeled" by Kevin Ryerson from John of Zebedee, who lived 2,000 years ago and was a follower of Christ (see *Psychoimmunity and the Healing Process*, Celestial Arts, 1986). To "channel" is to serve as a medium for a being from another spiritual plane or from another time. "John," the being who is channeled, envisions AIDS as a mirror reflection of the way that society has treated the high risk groups, homosexuals and drug abusers. In a separate channeling, a direct link is made between the collapse of the immune system and social disinvestment.

Like the positions of Antonio and Mullor, this New Age view presupposes a natural order that responds to moral outrages without the need for a special divine intervention. It is distinct from Mullor's position in that it locates the morally outrageous in society's *treatment* of high-risk groups rather than in *behaviors* of the high-risk groups themselves.

● **Discernment.** Believes that God is at work in the world in mysterious ways, without relying on a model of direct intervention. God somehow influences not only the consciousness of human beings, but also guides major historical events and shapes significant moments in the lives of individuals. Although the ways of God are difficult to discern, the ways in which things happen are surely more than coincidence.

Such an approach underlies the position taken by the gay activist writer John Fortunato in his book, *AIDS: The Spiritual Dilemma* (Harper and Row, 1987). Fortunato rejects the idea that AIDS is a divine punishment. He believes that we cannot know the ultimate reason for AIDS. And yet he still feels compelled to wrestle with the question of the meaning of AIDS in the divine scheme of things. Fortunato writes: "I do not know why God—whose ways I wish I could just give up trying to understand—initially chose gay men to comprise most of AIDS' victims." Fortunato is of the school of thought that there is a reason for

everything. Ultimately God is writing straight with crooked lines.

Fortunato speculates about redeeming elements that might be uncovered in the AIDS epidemic. Although Fortunato emphasizes that it is all a great mystery, he offers what he labels the "non-rational" suggestion that AIDS will put sufferers in touch with a true spirituality of death, resurrection, hope, and compassion, and that perhaps it will be through AIDS that society's attitude toward gays, drug abusers, and other marginalized groups might be converted.

What is fascinating about Fortunato's position is that he combines a gay activist view with the notion that AIDS has meaning in the divine plan.

John Paul II, although his specific discernment differs from Fortunato's, seems to take a similar approach to the question of God's activity in the world. Last fall, on the night he arrived in Miami for his second U.S. tour, the pope was asked whether AIDS is a punishment from God. He replied, amid many T.V. cameras, that "the ways of God are very difficult to determine." He said further that "homosexuals are in the heart of the church." During his trip, he both reached out compassionately to persons with AIDS and reasserted the church's official stand against homosexual activity. The pope's approach is neither to deny nor to overinterpret the activity of God, but to model an appropriate response in the face of an epidemic that challenges our powers of discernment.

• *Intentional.* Believes that God works through our inner life. God is experienced as a tug on our subconscious toward truth, goodness, beauty, and love. God is involved in human affairs insofar as human beings respond to this inner call and give themselves over to it.

That Eileen Flynn takes such a position is reflected in the title of her book, *AIDS: A Catholic Call to Compassion* (Sheed and Ward, 1985). Flynn discerns in AIDS a call for human beings to exercise Christian love of neighbor. She emphasizes universal human dignity, the special claims of the needy and the suffering, the imperative not to judge, the taking up of one's cross, being steadfast in hope, and many other central Christian

themes. Flynn is critical of official Catholic teaching about homosexual activity, and suggests that monogamous relationships be encouraged.

Flynn discusses in depth the place of God in the phenomenon of AIDS without ever bringing up the question of whether God causes AIDS. The immanence of God is God within the human heart; the transcendence of God is the divine call to growth in love. Flynn presents a God who acts not through any kind of direct intervention but rather as a forceful tug on human intentionality.

The U.S. Catholic bishops in "The Many Faces of AIDS" (*Origins* December 24, 1987) take a position on the question of divine activity that sounds very much like Flynn's. They say, "Jesus has revealed to us that God is compassionate, not vengeful"; and stress that "as with all other diseases, AIDS is a human illness." The bishops outline a compassionate response that respects official Catholic teaching on the meaning of human sexuality, and implicitly criticizes any position which discerns in AIDS a direct punishment from God. They call for Catholics to respond as Jesus would. They focus on revelation as the disclosure of the possibility of new life and the deeper meaning of divine love.

The position of the bishops is echoed in a pamphlet put out by the Catholic Health Association of the United States, "AIDS: Ethical Guidelines for Healthcare Providers" by Diana Bader and Elizabeth McMillan, 1987. These guidelines insist on the importance of correcting the belief that AIDS is a punishment from God: "Such an attitude, personally demeaning to the person with AIDS, has the further disastrous effect of isolating from the community the sick person most in need of its practical support. The Catholic voice needs to make these ethical points even more forcefully because some persons both inside and outside the church think that Catholic moral doctrine sanctions the punishment idea."

• *Process.* Believes that God's power is persuasive, not controlling. God created a universe with many risky possibilities. What God most offers human beings are choices. God does not foreknow the future, but rather struggles and suffers.

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triumphs and rejoices along with us.

This approach informs the position of Earl E. Shelp and Ronald H. Sunderland in their book, *AIDS and the Church* (Westminster Press, 1987). These scholars interpret AIDS as one unfortunate actualization of the many possibilities of this free and diverse universe that God has created. They argue that "God does not 'send' AIDS for some retributive purpose (such a thought flies in the face of the New Testament witness to a loving God). Rather, God 'risked' creating a world in which HIV could develop."

Shelp and Sunderland are therefore not as concerned about the cause of AIDS as they are about the human response to AIDS. God offers humankind the choice between accepting and rejecting the role of caregiver i.e., risking possible suffering to lovingly respond to the afflicted.

• *Secular.* Believes that the causes of this-worldly happenings can be explained adequately without any reference to God. Secularists characterize the "re-

ligious" view as holding that AIDS is a divine punishment, and sharply criticize that view. Loretta Koppelman, writing in a collection of essays, *AIDS: Ethics and Public Policy* (ed. by Christine Pierce and Donald VanDeVeer, Wadsworth, 1988), uncovers the contradictions inherent in the "punishment concept of disease," both religious and secular, when applied to AIDS. Her overall thrust, however, dismisses the value of any discussion whatsoever about the morality of behaviors involved in the transmission of AIDS. Her conclusion suggests that any wrestling with an ultimate meaning for AIDS is senseless and self-serving.

Writing in the same volume, Judith Wilson Ross offers an incisive analysis of various metaphors used to talk about AIDS. Drawing upon the thought of Susan Sontag, Ross concludes, "AIDS has been permitted and encouraged to carry a moral meaning, but the morality is in our minds, not in the disease." In yet another essay in the same volume, Allan M. Brandt writes, "In some quarters the misapprehension persists: AIDS is caused by homosexuality rather than a retrovirus. In this confused logic, the answer to the problem is simple: Repress these behaviors. Implicit in this approach to the problem are powerful notions of culpability and guilt."

Common to these interpretations is the insistence that AIDS is caused by a virus, period. Any attempt to import a dramatic meaning from outside the strict medical model will result in a destructive distortion of reality.

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**T**he debate about the meaning of AIDS is inextricably mixed with the debate about the meaning of God. Positions taken on AIDS education, prevention, and research are grounded in presuppositions about the way in which God is at work—or not—in the world.

Thus, to challenge any of the positions I have outlined is to challenge not just an opinion about a disease but deeply held sets of presuppositions and beliefs. It is futile to argue against an interventionist that divine justice is not at work on the

grounds that not every case fits a neat pattern. Nor is it effective to argue against an avowed secularist that the combination of factors involved is too uncanny to be mere coincidence.

Nor is this by any means a debate confined to interventionists and secularists. Most Catholics, for example, would find the secular view foreign to their consciousness. Yet a broad pluralism exists even among Catholics who may think in terms of the interventionist, discernment, intentional, or process model, or more likely some combination thereof.

The trouble with this variety of competing beliefs is that issues that should be central to society's response to the AIDS epidemic—such as care-giving, prevention, and societal values—are becoming exclusively associated with certain sets of presuppositions, hampering the debate about what is a proper public response. For example, those who see AIDS as the hand of God warning about social permissiveness seem inclined to permit "the sinners to suffer" the consequences of their misdeeds. In other circles, it is difficult to discuss the behaviors by which the disease has most often been transmitted in the U.S.; any mention of "morality" is taken, of itself, to be judgmental and reactionary. Among those who see in AIDS an opportunity to exercise Christian charity and healing, any general questioning of social permissiveness is viewed as inappropriate and irrelevant to the task at hand.

Can society distinguish between giving heartfelt material and spiritual help to the suffering and condoning, without hesitation, any lifestyle whatsoever? Can society distinguish between blaming AIDS victims for the outbreak and spread of the disease on the one hand, and discussing the morality and risk associated with those behaviors? The bishops' perspective in "The Many Faces of AIDS" is a striking example that we can. Although the bishops' moral objection to any homosexual activity is hotly contested within society at large, the bishops still manage to stress a loving response to persons with AIDS while upholding the church's guidelines for moral sexual behavior. □