



Religion and HIV/AIDS: When Interfaith is Not Enough

By Susan Henking

Posted on August 3, 2009, Printed on August 3, 2009

<http://www.religiondispatches.org/archive/1724/>

New York City has been dealing with HIV/AIDS for a long time. The site of [1989's "Stop the Church" action by ACT UP](#) and of Cardinal O'Connor's controversial interference with the politics of AIDS education, it is a very local example, in a global context, of the complex relations of religion and AIDS/HIV.

In early July, the city [launched new efforts](#) at "interfaith" cooperation, with representatives of 50 "faith-based entities and AIDS service organizations" partnering. The new action, which includes a call to "Step Up in Faith", is being coordinated by the [NYC Faith in Action for AIDS/HIV Prevention and Education Coalition](#) (NYCFIA).

While Los Angeles holds title to the most religiously diverse US city and perhaps in the world, in a city as religiously diverse as New York, such organizations have significant reach. Flushing alone (a neighborhood in Queens) is [home to more than 200 places of worship](#).

Recent months also saw June's call for "[Comprehensive HIV Prevention in Church and Community](#)" promulgated at the 27th General Synod of the United Church of Christ in Grand Rapids. Every step helps, right?

In addition to such efforts "within" progressive religion, AIDS advocacy organizations take religion seriously – and draw strategically on the likely utility of religious organizations in reaching wide populations. Thus, the [Gay Men's Health Crisis](#) in New York included faith-based organizations in groups which must be involved in their 2009 [Call for a National AIDS Strategy](#). They are not alone in doing so.

Progressive religion (whether Christian, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim or. . .) can – and must – help in meeting the challenges of AIDS in the twenty first century both locally and globally, in New York City and elsewhere. The popularity of the notion of interfaith (what was once called ecumenical) organizations is a perhaps unsurprising response to what seems like endemic inter-religious violence; a defensive maneuver, in some ways. Indeed, the literature on both everyday and more elaborate interfaith linkages — from marriage and dating through theological and

dogmatic formulations — abounds. Scholars from various areas (sociology, theology, religious studies, history), clergy from various traditions, and popular culture pundits of many sorts are offering their insights on how to live in a world of religious pluralism — and in an “interfaith” world.

Indeed, under the guise of noting the religious pluralism of the world in which we live, many are arguing for an inclusive interfaith world (There is even a book entitled *The Complete Idiot’s Guide to Interfaith Relationships* by Laurie Rozakis.)

And yet, like [Sam Harris](#), it is possible to worry that “progressive” religion and “progressive” interfaith efforts distract us from what might be seen as the overwhelming illogic of religion *per se*, whether progressive or not. And, there is the worry that interfaith organizations do not include the secular, the atheistic, the agnostic. Certainly interfaith organizations have worked for civil rights in America, toward peace in the Middle East, and in seeking justice and compassion for persons with HIV/AIDS, right? And moves like that of the United Church of Christ are better than their opposite — overt hostility toward persons with HIV/AIDS. But do they distract us from the illogic of religion? The hostility? The long-term negative consequences?

Such questions are not relevant only for New York City.

Why? New York’s interfaith work on HIV/AIDS is not the only setting in which (relatively progressive) religion serves as a conduit for positive efforts around HIV/AIDS. Nor are they the only site where interfaith organizations are key leaders in the response to HIV/AIDS.. UNAIDS both [recognizes](#) that 70 percent of the world’s people identify with a religion and “prioritizes work at the global level with large networks of FBOs [faith-based organizations], religious leaders, and networks of religious leaders living with HIV.” Examples they identify include the [World Conference on Religion and Peace](#) and the Roman Catholic confederation called [Caritas Internationalis](#). The UNAIDS site also notes:

UNAIDS also collaborates with the Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance, Tear Fund, Islamic Relief, the Sangha Metta Project and the Art of Living foundation, a Hindu group building a leadership platform among Hindu religious leaders in India. In November 2007 the Executive Director of UNAIDS, Dr Peter Piot, will give the plenary address at the Saddleback church Global AIDS summit.

Certainly, efforts to prevent HIV transmission, to care for infected persons, and to work against stigma reach across many religions, including Hinduism, Islam and Buddhism. And, religion – for good or ill – affects the lives of even those 30 percent who are not themselves associated with a tradition: those of us in the US, for example, who see ourselves as secular. Today, many would argue, with the increasing political importance of religion, interfaith work is essential.

Secularization theories were wrong. It is over.

Yet, whether one agrees with Harris (and others like him) that religion in and of itself is illogical and dangerous, such voices are important correctives to any naïve embracing of faith-based organizations or interfaith work as a solution to the HIV/AIDS crisis.

The Saddleback Church, for example, cited by UNAIDS, is also notable for its exclusionary policies; whether labeled LGBTQ or “homosexuals” some are [not welcome in their community](#). Likewise, while Roman Catholicism has Caritas Internationalis, it is also insistently and dogmatically anti-choice, hostile to even the idea of women priests, and, in late 2008, [stood opposed](#) to a U.N. resolution calling for nations to decriminalize homosexuality.

While the Anglican faith has Gene Robinson as an openly gay bishop in New Hampshire and has struggled with transgender issues in recent months, it also has global opposition to such inclusion

including, for example, [the voice of Nigerian Archbishop Akinola](#) in response to Robinson's election.

And, while Islam has the wonderful resources, [HIV/AIDS, Islam and the Muslim World](#) and [Queer Muslim Revolution](#), Islam also has the Taliban. The list could go on — Judaism, Buddhism, and other traditions, likewise offer both progressive and horrifying faces to the world. As [one blog put it](#): “US HIV Money to Evangelicals, Africa's Homophobes , Not MSMs”.

While “progressive” movements within many religions and interfaith organizations work *for* us, others work for hate. Harris requires us to ask whether the progressive forms of religion — and responses to HIV/AIDS in religious forms — mask other responses, rendering them less apparent by making them seem exceptional.

So, with regard to this new effort in New York, we must ask: What does this new coalition bode for the future? Will our willingness to celebrate this new interfaith effort sideline us from the equally important effort to refuse to support callous religious opposition to sex education? To condom distribution and needle exchanges? To inclusion of LGBTQ persons? To the real illogic of wishful thinking in the 21st century?

Is religion really making things better?

*Susan Henking is Professor of Religious Studies at Hobart and William Smith Colleges in Geneva, NY—coordinate colleges for women (William Smith) and men (Hobart College). Her work focuses on theories of religion as well as religion in relation to gender and sexuality. She is co-editor, with Gary David Comstock, of *Que(e)rying Religion* (1997) and, with William Parsons and Diane Jonte Pace, of *Mourning Religion*. She also writes on higher education. The views shared here are, of course, not those of her employer, Hobart and William Smith Colleges, but of Susan Henking.*

© 2009 Religion Dispatches. All rights reserved.

View this story online at: <http://www.religiondispatches.org/archive/1724/>