



# THE MAKING OF MORAL PANICS

Religious Rhetoric in HIV/AIDS  
Discourses



# This week:

- Early religious responses to HIV and AIDS (1980-1990s)
- How have these responses shaped the care and treatment of people living with HIV and AIDS (PLWHA)?
- How have religious responses developed over the past 20 years?
- The roles of religion and spirituality in the care of PLWHA (tutorial)

# HIV and AIDS – some facts

- AIDS (acquired immune deficiency syndrome) is a syndrome, which is likely caused by HIV (the human immunodeficiency virus), a retrovirus that harms the immune system by attacking white blood cells.
- First came to the attention of the Centres for Disease Control in 1981 – it took until 1984 (and over 4000 cases in the US) for the source of this syndrome to be identified as viral and blood-borne.
- There were approximately 36.7 million people worldwide living with HIV/AIDS at the end of 2015. Of these, 1.8 million were children (<15 years old).
- There are 25.5 million people living with HIV/AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa.
- As of June 2016, 18.2 million people living with HIV were accessing antiretroviral therapy (ART) globally, up from 15.8 million in June 2015, 7.5 million in 2010, and less than one million in 2000.

# Initial responses to HIV epidemic by Christian communities

- Religious leaders, organizations, and activists constructed AIDS as a *religious* and *moral* epidemic, as well as a medical event. This has shaped (and continues to shape) cultural, religious and medical responses to HIV.
- Most public health workers and Christian communities described AIDS as a biomedical issue (a virus) that required prevention through safer sex and harm reduction techniques (e.g. condom use, needle exchanges, etc).
  - *Many church leaders called for a compassionate response (whilst recognizing the moral quandary this would cause)*
- For more conservative Christian groups, as well as mainstream media, AIDS was primarily a *moral* crisis, rather than a biomedical one, caused by particular sexual *identities*, or sexual *practices*, rather than a virus per se. Prevention therefore involved prescribing human '*moral*' (i.e. heterosexual, monogamous) behaviour.
  - *'Their aim was not merely to stop the flow of microbes but to spread religious and moral conduct.'* (Petro, *After the Wrath of God*, p.6)
  - *'Innocent' vs. 'guilty' victims of AIDS*

# The 'gay plague'

- A divine punishment for sexual promiscuity (especially gay male promiscuity) – requiring a *moral* response.
- Dangers of AIDS = dangers of homosexuality
- Compared to pestilence or leprosy – biblical diseases sent by God in response to sin.
- Jerry Falwell (Moral Majority Coalition) –stated that AIDS was God's judgment against people and societies that do not live by God's rule: "AIDS is not just God's punishment for homosexuals, it is God's punishment for the society that tolerates homosexuals" (1986).
- President Ronald Reagan echoed Falwell when he (eventually) spoke openly about AIDS – a punishment by God for breaking the 10 commandments.
- In the early 1990s, US evangelist Billy Graham asked, "Is AIDS a judgment of God? I could not say for sure, but I think so." He later apologized for these remarks.

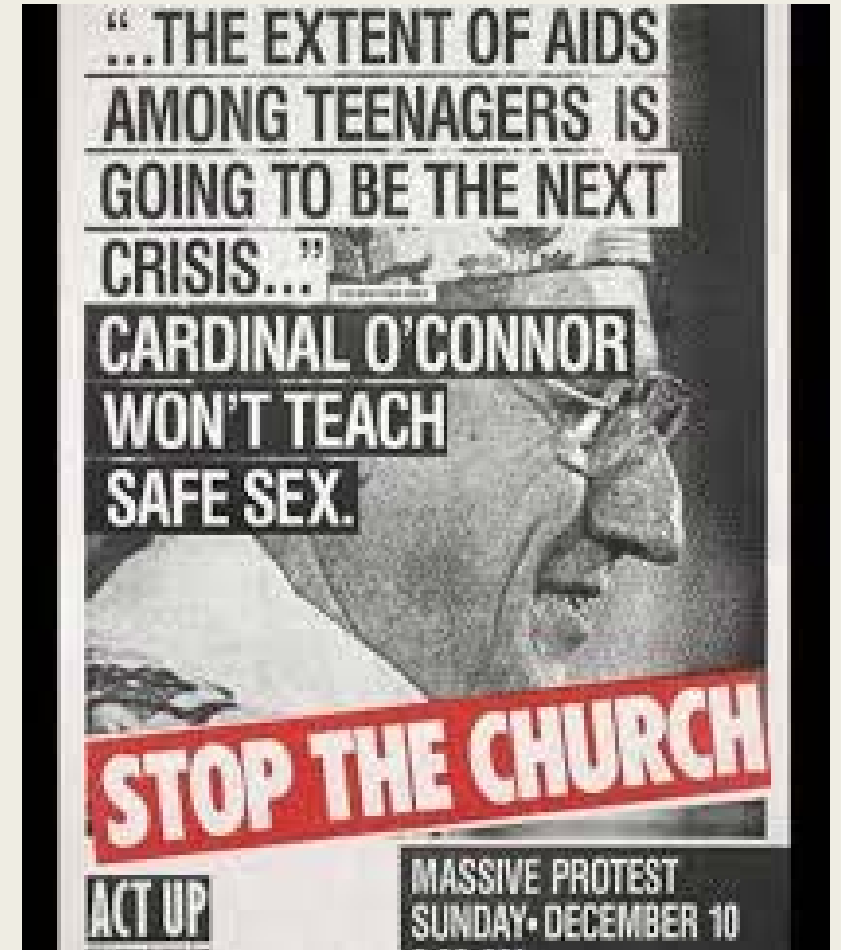
# AIDS as a moral issue

“Through the AIDS crisis, Christian moral assumptions regarding sexuality were elaborated by, attached to, and translated into broader political and public health discourses, which in turn often reappeared in theological and religious rhetoric. The convergence of scientific, theological, and religious rhetoric proved powerful in the moral languages about sexuality that developed in the wake of—and through—the epidemic.”

Petro, *After the Wrath of God*, p.5

# ACT-UP and 'Stop the Church' campaign (1989)

- ACT-UP (AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power) started in 1987 by activist Larry Kramer
- 'Silence = Death' – protesting governmental and institutional lassitude in responding to AIDS crisis.
- 'Stop the Church' – protest over Cardinal John O'Connor's continued condemnation of homosexuality, condom use, and abortion.
- Around 5000 demonstrators from ACT-UP and WHAM (Women's Health Action Mobilization) rallied outside St Patrick's Cathedral, NY.
- Some protesters entered the church during mass, disrupting the service and staging a 'die in'.



# Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes



A play by Tony Kushner (1993)

Addresses the early years of the AIDS crisis from religious, political, and cultural perspectives.

Critiques religious and political responses to AIDS – but also holds out hope for compassionate religious/spiritual responses to this crisis.

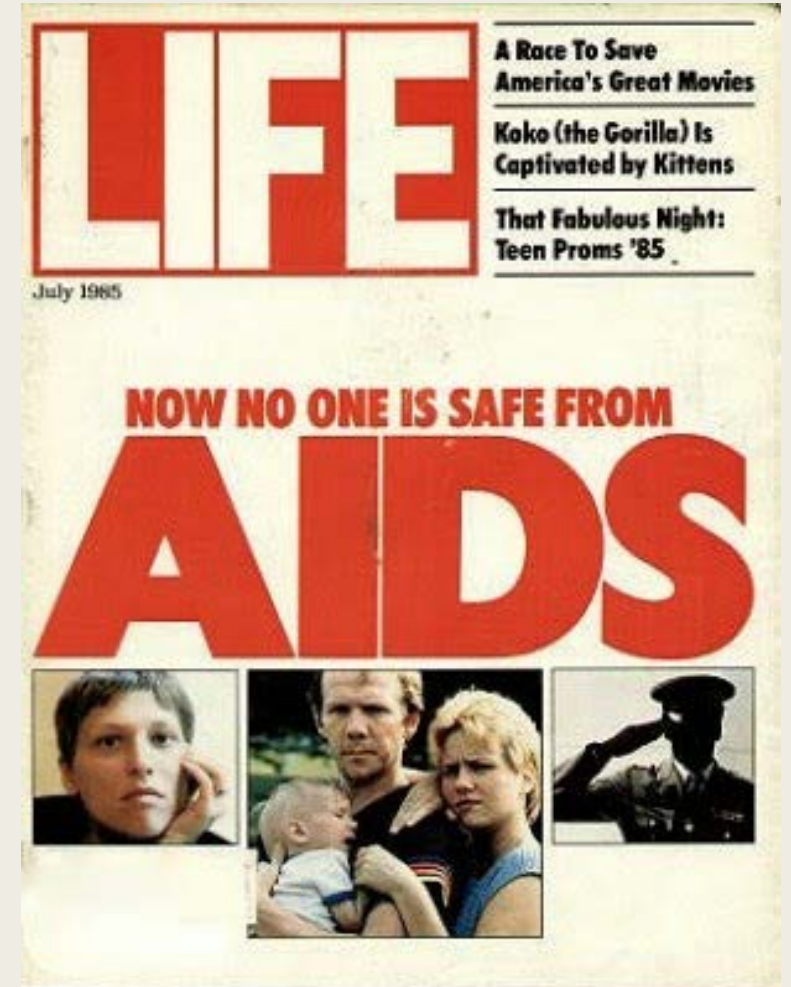
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_6lQY0kwwg\\_M](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_6lQY0kwwg_M)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9tP5mzKzXxg>



# The mid-1980s and 1990s

- Growing recognition that AIDS 'does not discriminate' – not a 'gay' syndrome.
- Moral panic within mainstream culture – blame, stigma, fear over the 'spread' of HIV. Already marginalized groups were increasingly stigmatized as a 'threat'.
- AIDS became a moral issue around promiscuity, as well as gay sex.
- In the US, Latino and African-American communities were most adversely hit by AIDS.
- Women (especially women of colour) were noticeably impacted, both in the US and in sub-Saharan Africa.
- NB: Today, more than 50% of PLWHA are women; AIDS is the leading cause of death among African-American women between 25 and 34.



# TV public announcements on AIDS



Strong rhetoric of fear around AIDS

Moral imperative to these ads  
– lifestyle (especially sexual lifestyle) is the key focus.

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oMjCQt3KaRI>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OJ9f378T49E>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9SqRNUUOk7s>

# Changing religious discourses

- By the 1990s, there was a growing awareness among religious communities that there was a duty to tackle the AIDS crisis, and offer care to PLWHA.
- E.g. US Catholic Bishops Conference 1997 pastoral letter, “Always Our Children: A Pastoral Message to Parents of Homosexual Children”:

*“The Church recognizes the importance and urgency of ministering to persons with HIV/AIDS...[I]t has had a devastating effect upon [homosexuals] and has brought great sorrow to many parents, families and friends....We reject the idea that HIV/AIDS is a direct punishment from God. Furthermore, persons with AIDS are not distant, unfamiliar people, the objects of our mingled pity and aversion. We must...embrace them with unconditional love.”*

# Changing religious discourses?

- Other religious communities (Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist) likewise began to respond more positively to the HIV/AIDS crisis – focus on care for the sick, ‘regardless’ of their lifestyles.
- Yet, the moral dimension of AIDS remains, with many religious groups promoting abstinence, rather than safer sex, and remaining divided over condom use.

# Morality and AIDS

- George W. Bush's President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) – heralded the primary role of evangelical Christians in the fight against AIDS as a *moral* fight.
  - *PEPFAR spent over \$18 million on abstinence education*
- Rick Warren – Southern Baptist leader of Saddleback Church, which promotes a 'biblically-based' approach to tackling AIDS (abstinence and monogamy).
  - *Religious function vs. cultural function (apply your hermeneutic of suspicion)*
  - *The linking of sexuality and spirituality appealed to conservative Christian and Jewish leaders in the US - religious and moral reform seen as central to the future of AIDS prevention and care*
  - *"Let me say this: I don't think we can deny that there is a moral and spiritual component to prevention" (Senator Barack Obama, 2006).*

# AIDS and religion today

- UNAIDS report: “Communities of faith play a very significant role in influencing people’s behaviour and attitudes, and in providing care and support for AIDS.”
- AIDS is seen as a spiritual crisis as well as a medical one – affecting people’s faiths and spiritual wellbeing.
- Many religious communities offer care and support to PLWHA, as well as campaigning for greater justice in tackling AIDS around the world.

*“To respond to this challenge, the churches must be transformed in the face of the HIV/AIDS crisis, in order that they may become a force for transformation – bringing healing, hope, and accompaniment to all affected by HIV/AIDS” (World Council of Churches, 2001)*