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AIDS AND RELIGION: 'THE WAVE OF HATE MUST STOP'

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The Hon. Michael Kirby AC CMG

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The Hon. Michael Kirby AC CMG*
(Australia)

IS THERE A PROBLEM?

Everything that needs to be said for this dialogue was stated by Bishop Desmond Tutu, Nobel Peace Prize Laureate and Archbishop Emeritus of Cape Town, South Africa¹. It was he who declared this month that the time had come, particularly for Africans, to stop the “wave of hate” and to stand up “against wrong”. He was referring to the wrong to “gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people” who are “part of the African family”.

Relevant to the struggle against HIV/AIDS, which has afflicted humanity since the 1980s, the hate that must stop is even more widely directed. The vulnerable groups are not only gays (men who have sex with men –

* Former Justice of the High Court of Australia (1996-2009); member of the inaugural WHO Global Commission on AIDS (1988-92); member of the UNAIDS Reference Group on AIDS and Human Rights (2003-); Laureate of the UNESCO Prize for Human Rights Education (1998).

¹ <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/03/11/AR2010031103341.html>

MSM). They also include sex workers (CSWs), injecting drug users (IDUs) and women who are particularly susceptible in this epidemic.

As to whether there is a problem, listen to what Bishop Tutu said:

- * “Men have been falsely charged in Senegal and health services for these men and their community have suffered.
- * In Malawi, men have been jailed and humiliated for expressing their partnerships with other men.
- * Just this month, mobs in Mtwapa township, Kenya attacked men they suspected of being gay. Kenyan religious leaders, I am ashamed to say, threatened an HIV clinic there for providing counselling services to all members of the community, because the clerics want gay men excluded.
- * Uganda’s parliament is debating legislation that would make homosexuality punishable by life imprisonment.
- * More discriminatory legislation has been debated in Rwanda and Burundi.
- * These are terrible backward steps for human rights in Africa. Our lesbian and gay brothers and sisters across Africa are living in fear.”

All of this news from Africa would be bad enough. But the same fear extends far beyond that continent. It exists in many countries where, despite the knowledge that science now affords us about human sexuality, irrational hatred of sexual minorities and sexual activities is encouraged and even sometimes promoted by religious leaders, in supposed reliance upon their understandings of religious texts. They rely on their imperfect human understanding of what was written in ancient books long before Dr. Alfred Kinsey and his many followers demonstrated the realities of human sexual experience; the frequency and variety of its manifestations; and the dangers and injustice of punishing people for adult, private, consensual sexual conduct.

Most religious people are good and kind. Love for one another exists as a basic tenet in all religions and all cultures. I have myself been brought up in religious faith. I honour brothers and sisters in all religions who are struggling to make a charitable, informed and unbiased contribution to the global struggle against HIV/AIDS.

However, officially the Roman Catholic and Greek and Orthodox Christian churches are still in serious denial about the scientific evidence available about human sexuality. As they have often been in denial about science and its other teachings in the past. Just as they originally denied the opinions of Galileo and Copernicus that the earth circled the sun. And as they and the Anglican Church originally denied Darwin's thesis of evolution of the species, expounded 150 years ago.

Clutching onto imperfect understandings of ancient scripture, leaders of most of the spiritual faiths, instead of re-examining their holy texts by reference to science (as they did in other instances in the past), have adopted a new, irrational approach. An example may be found in the current attitudes towards gays. Last year, the representative of the Holy See told a United Nations meeting that criminal laws against sexual minorities (introduced to give effect to the supposed religious prohibition) should now be abolished. Yet that Church goes on to teach that gays must adhere to a celibate life and never engage in their 'unnatural' sexual conduct. This is a seriously conflicted and unstable instruction.

Given that, in many countries, members of religious faiths (in particular) should have special expertise on the extreme difficulty of enforcing celibacy on human beings (and that they must now be aware of the conflicts, failings and temptations that this most unnatural demand

results in), it is astonishing that such an instruction should be given to the faithful by presumably rational people. Or that it should be taught from pulpits and in churches, mosques and temples. Yet so it is. The public are whipped up into the kind of hate that Bishop Tutu has described in Africa.

In other parts of the world, the hate may not always be so intense. But the stigma over sexual conduct that is often taught by religious people cannot be accepted any longer. It is now a major cause of death in the AIDS epidemic.

It has to stop. Not only because it is immoral, conflicted, irrational and wrong. Not only because it is a denial of the essential spiritual message of love that lies at the heart of all of the world's great religions. But also because it is now seriously impeding the global struggle against HIV and AIDS for the saving of lives. The magnitude of the suffering demands blunt speaking at this time. As Bishop Tutu has said:

“All of us, especially Africans, need access to essential HIV services. ... This pandering to intolerance is being done by politicians looking for scapegoats for their failures ... but it is a great wrong. An even larger offence is that being done in the name of God. Show me where Christ said “Love thy fellow man, except for the gay ones”. Gay people too are made in my God's image. I would never worship a homophobic God.”

Rightly, Bishop Tutu has drawn a parallel between the earlier, successful, global struggle against racial apartheid and the present global struggle against sexual apartheid. To the moral struggle against sexual apartheid must now be added the urgent needs of the struggle against HIV and AIDS.

So we *do* have a problem. It has brought us to this dialogue in Den Dolder. At its core, it arises from the fact that, thirty years into this epidemic, we do not have a cure or a vaccine for HIV or AIDS. We have palliative treatment of great utility. But the world cannot afford the continued economic burden of providing such treatment to 2.7 million new HIV infections each year. Urgent strategies of the world today must be addressed to the prevention of further infections.

Prevention cannot work so long as our societies stigmatise and hate many of the people most at risk of infection. Only by getting into their heads and helping them to practise and promote safer sexual and other conduct, can we bring the AIDS epidemic down. We cannot do this effectively without co-operation and support from religious leaders. Yet all too often they are silent or actually speak against the policies that may help to reduce the stigma; promote the necessary realism; and spread the love of God, not the hate of vulnerable minorities:

- * Too many preach that condoms must not be distributed, because they promote 'extra-marital sex' and falsely claim that condoms are ineffective to prevent the spread of the virus;
- * Too many oppose early factual education of young people in the requirements of safer sex that may help save their lives;
- * Too many condemn syringe exchange facilities that help reduce the spread of infection by injecting drug users;
- * Too many oppose the provision of condoms and other protective facilities in prisons and other institutions that are potential incubators of the epidemic;
- * Too many object to the decriminalisation of sex work, despite its existence from ancient times in every society and the value for life

and human dignity that needs to be mobilised so as to empower those who work within it;

- * Too many fight fiercely against the removal of legal discrimination against gays and promote attacks on and hatred of gays in many societies; and
- * Far too many resist the removal of the patriarchal attitudes to women, defending the persistence of their second-class status on unconvincing religious grounds.

Those who criticise these attitudes are often castigated as God's enemy. Well, I declare that we are God's friends and the helpers of true spirituality and love. The religion in which I was raised had, at its core, love for God and for one another. Reconciliation. Universalism. Non-discrimination. This should be the message of religion, especially today. Yet everywhere, the message is different in practice. Too many old men in fine dress preaching dangerous messages. Sadly many of them in the past, as we now know, have been hypocrites and false-sayers.

So this is the immediate problem we face. Its urgency demands that it should be clearly identified in an appeal to the rational mind of humanity. It is that rational mind, which is genetically part of our species and, if you like, God-given, that will rescue the human family from the irrationality and wave of hate that Bishop Tutu has identified and condemned. We should join him and support him in this hour of global need.

WHAT EXACTLY IS THE PROBLEM?

The special problem in relation to the HIV/AIDS epidemic is that the principal vectors for the spread of the infection of HIV involve three

means that are often the subject of religious antagonism. I refer to sex; drugs and women.

Many religions demand exclusive marital relationships for any form of human sexual conduct. That this is not what happens in most societies does not matter. Marriage remains the religious gold standard. Those who do not, or cannot, fit within that standard are cast out of the kingdom of the faithful. But that means a huge proportion of humanity. And it is this proportion that is at risk of fear and stigma, specifically damaging to the struggle against the spread of HIV. I refer to MSM, CSWs and others who engage in non-marital sexual relations.

Likewise, religion typically opposes drug use, which is often rightly seen as diminishing the full capacity of human self-control that is part of our essential human nature. Still, if this is part of the reality of the world, we must face it realistically and deal with its consequences. We should not write off to an early death those who do not meet religions' standards. Women are particularly vulnerable to HIV because, in many societies, they are controlled by men. The stories of violence against women infected by their husbands are all too common. It is a sad tale of disempowerment and vulnerability.

There is a serious tension between the endeavours of international and national leaders to promote good public health strategies to confront HIV and AIDS and the repeated instruction of many religious leaders today, denouncing adultery, condemning MSM, rejecting IDUs and disempowering women. If the reasoned messages of the Secretary-General of the United Nations, the Director of UNDP, the Director of UNAIDS and the High Commissioner of Human Rights are not heeded,

a clarion wake-up call must now be given. This is because, following the global financial crisis, the world will simply not keep handing out the funds to provide expensive anti-retroviral treatment for HIV to the millions of newly infected people who will need them every year. We must halt the expansion of the epidemic. The urgent imperative is to promote prevention of the further spread of the virus. We need to redouble our efforts to secure effective vaccines and curative drugs. But, in the meantime, we must all contribute to prevention. Millions of lives are at stake. Protecting them effectively is one of the greatest moral challenges that is before the human family today.

The particular circumstances in Africa referred to by Bishop Tutu are illustrations of the kind of stigma that is being spread throughout the world, in part by uninformed religious teachers. Those who give these lessons should be reading the words of Tutu, a true spiritualist. He has declared that the sorry history of recent years in Africa demonstrate the manner in which religion is all too often pandering to prejudice. Everyone, he suggests, seems to need someone to look down on. Religion should be leading people to look up: to the path of love, not hate.

WHAT IS THE SOLUTION?

There are no easy solutions to the challenge that I have identified. Pessimists would say there are no solutions at all. The patriarchal organisation of religion; the vested interests; the ignorant literalism of scriptural interpretation; the anti-scientific attitude towards new knowledge; the ease of whipping up fear and hatred; and the diversions that these attitudes produce, all make it hard to turn the global response around.

Some religious leaders protest that they already have the ‘magic cure’ to HIV. ‘Just say no’, they proclaim. Objective evidence shows that this strategy usually fails. People lapse. People are human. They fall into temptations for highly pleasurable activities. For one thing, telling people ‘just to say no’ has not always worked with religious personnel themselves. How could it be expected to work with ordinary people? How, for example, can it seriously be expected that ordinary gay people will deny themselves the human endearment and life commitment of faithful companionships? Any religious leader who seriously suggests that the gay minority, numbering millions of human beings, should live a life of celibacy needs to get urgent psychotherapy. It is just not going to happen. Human realities must be faced. Those realities demand a new approach. If necessary, they require a new reading of ancient scriptural texts.

If religion needs such an adjustment in the current age, the realities must immediately address the minority communities that are at special risk to HIV infection. For MSM, it is essential to re-read the passages of scriptural condemnation that are often cited as divine foundations for hatred and punishment for gays. Coming to us as they do through multiple translations and from societies so different from our own, have these texts been misunderstood? Can it seriously be suggested that a loving God would hate a proportion of human beings who are gay or try to force them, against their nature, into heterosexual relations, just to please those who demand a false universal binary division of humanity? This seems as unlikely as suggesting that God hates left-handed people. Or black-skinned people. Or tall people. Variation is part of nature – of all living things. If such variation is God-given, it scarcely seems

credible that God would impose on his creatures an irrational and perverse indulgence in activities alien to their nature. Or deny them activities central to their own discovery of love and human support.

Given that the solution of the present interface between religion and epidemiology is unlikely to be either the complete surrender of religion to science, still less of science to religion, a compromise needs to be found. At this dialogue, we should work on this objective. In some religious circles, that compromise is now being addressed. It is not always easy to find. Sometimes it is painful just to explore it. But new lines must be drawn to chart the way ahead. They must be based on the urgent needs of the times; the moral necessity to reduce the damaging hate; and the immediate imperative to promote awareness, knowledge and self-protection, so as quickly to bring down the rates of HIV and the toll of death and suffering.

Specifically, what can people of religion do at this moment to help achieve such a compromise?

- * Religious institutions already help in many practical tasks of dealing with the consequences of the AIDS epidemic. They do so by providing the loving care for AIDS patients in hospitals and care agencies, as the Roman Catholic sisters at St. Vincent's Hospital in Sydney, Australia, have done from the very beginning of the epidemic. They provide comfort and support for the sick, the dying and the grieving, as religious people are doing every day in a world where deaths from AIDS still run at millions every year;
- * Religious schools and colleges should include truthful instruction to the young about the new and special danger of HIV that is in the midst of our societies. The young, particularly, need truthful

instruction and knowledge so that they can protect themselves in the actuality of their lives. To deny such knowledge in the name of religious fidelity and in the face of the real dangers that face young people is very wrong. Somehow religions must find a means of upholding their doctrinal understandings whilst providing access to other and different knowledge for the young;

* In considering notions such as chastity, virginity, monogamy and the like, religion must face, with clear insight, the truth of human conduct in the here and now. It must accept that chastity is not a path suitable to most human beings, certainly those in modern societies where they are daily bombarded by sexual messages of temptation and fantasy. Access to the condom is a kind of litmus test in this respect. To ban condoms as a tool of promiscuity might arguably have been understandable in the 1950s. It became less so after the sexual revolution and scientific advances in safe contraception in the decades that followed. It became positively wrong and destructive of human life in the decades of AIDS. It would not have required a brilliant theologian to construct a sensitive new rule that drew a distinction between condom use just for sexual promiscuity and usage to avoid spreading the HIV infection. Yet the great religious minds of the age, so skilled in dancing on the head of the pin, have not been able to wrap themselves around such a simple theological distinction. Instead, by opposing the availability of condoms and condemning their use, as religions do in many developing countries, religion has condemned many adherents to death in the actuality of their circumstances;

* Secular governments have their own responsibility to ensure the spread of knowledge and the prevention of stigma and hatred. In

some of the instances mentioned by Bishop Tutu, the authorities have stepped in, as police did recently in Kenya to protect gays at the mercy of a mob. Where religions fail, there will always be dissident members and preachers of the essential messages of love and of life. Governments need to reach out to, and support, the voices of these wise prophets until, in God's time, organised religion comes itself to listen to their wisdom;

- * Religious leaders and theologians need to go back to the supposed textual foundations for religious homophobia, sexual condemnation and patriarchy to search for the essential messages of love that lie at the root of all great religions. As a judge, I often saw lawyers who were distracted from the great themes because they confined their attention to particular words, read out of context. That, I suggest, is what has happened in the reading of religious texts interpreted as being antagonistic to gays, adulterers, apostates and others. As the world to which the religious text is addressed has changed so radically from the world in which it was first written, it behoves modern religious leaders to read the scriptural instructions in a contemporary context. Religion today, if it is to remain relevant, must re-examine its message with a light sharpened by modern scientific knowledge. When the literal truth of the creation of the universe described in the Biblical words of *Genesis* was cast in doubt by Darwin's discoveries, religion gave way. Religion gave way in its struggle with Galileo and Copernicus. Most religions today do not literally demand death for apostates but respect the human right of people to change or abandon their religions. So the world of religion does move on. But a faster pace for change is needed in our current AIDS

predicament, and especially in developing countries as Bishop Tutu has explained; and

- * Religion must be taken back to its basics, of truly protecting every precious and beloved human life; of sanctifying human beings in all of their variety; of helping the sick; and of leaving judgment of gays, adulterers and drug users to God. Unless religion can take this path, hate and stigma will continue to drive frightened people into ignorance. It will rob them of knowledge that is protective of their persons and thus of the persons of others. It will promote death. In the age of AIDS, we need a circuit breaker for a new relationship of religion and epidemiology.

HOW CAN WE ALL HELP ADVANCE THE SOLUTION?

Faced with a challenge so large and complex, it is easy to despair. How can lay people challenge the interpretations of holy texts to which the religious may devote their lives? How can the power relationships that have lasted so long be altered? How can attitudes of discomfort towards minorities be changed? Above all, how can change be secured in a very short time to meet the extreme urgency of the predicaments of suffering and the diminished capacity of our world to fund long-term AIDS treatments?

There are glimmers of hope. Never has there been a time when so many leaders of the world community have spoken so bluntly about the need to promote prevention as well as of human respect and dignity in the face of AIDS. The Secretary-General of the United Nations. The Administrator of UNDP. The Director of UNAIDS. National leaders. So many have spoken with clear voices. But are the religious leaders of the world listening? Do they realise the special need for moral leadership on

their part? Some are responding, as Bishop Tutu shows so clearly. But far too many are deaf or indifferent to his appeals. Some appear willing to write off the minorities in their ardent defence of unbending interpretations of old scriptural metaphors. This is a double tragedy for our time.

Those who know the history of the AIDS epidemic, and what has worked and not worked in containing it, must re-double their efforts to engage with religious leaders. That is why this present encounter is so unusual and precious. Urgent steps need to be taken world-wide, if possible with religious support:

- * The removal of all remaining criminal punishments of gay people everywhere;
- * The decriminalisation of consensual adult sex work and the empowerment of sex workers so that they may safely insist on condom usage;
- * The provision of safe environments for sterile syringe exchange for IDU's;
- * The promotion of the education and empowerment of women, for they are normally the greatest teachers of the younger generation;
- * The impartial education in schools and colleges of safer sexual and other practices;
- * Better and more candid community education and the promotion of self-awareness;
- * Laws, policies and leadership to combat discrimination and stigma;
- * The promotion of contacts between religious leaders and people living with HIV and AIDS. PLWHAs are often the best advocates for human empathy and understanding, love and sharing. In my

youth, this is what helped Australians to go beyond the 'White Australia' policy. Getting to know people of different races, cultures and lives. Appreciating that diversity is all simply part of the world's reality;

- * The encouragement and promotion of great religious spirits, like Bishop Tutu, whose words are always powerful with love and the true essence of their religion;
- * The engagement of epidemiologists and community representatives with theologians to encourage contextual interpretations of scripture and an awareness of contemporary urgencies; and
- * The promotion of the role of the secular state to uphold the rights of all people and to protect the vulnerable, including against the sorry instances of religious-supported ignorance and violence that Bishop Tutu describes and that we all knew about.

BECOMING PART OF THE SOLUTION NOT THE PROBLEM

The world, in its AIDS predicament, needs an agenda for change. Is there time to make a difference? There has to be. Somehow we must reduce the continuing infections, for resources will not be available indefinitely to support treatment for the newly infected year by year. How can we do this? We certainly know the measure and nature of the problem. We know what we can do right now to stem the tide. We must turn to religious leaders themselves to provide solutions beyond the simplistic and ineffective demands to 'just say no'. True love for the lives of others must illuminate our answers. Truly, this is a genuine right to life issue. It is past time to expect that effective answers will be given. The global challenge of HIV/AIDS demands all of us that we be included

amongst the solution. At the moment in the world, sadly, religion is all too often part of the problem of HIV/AIDS.
