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## Biblical Truth for Today's Church

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### LATIMER COMMENT 25

#### A DISCRIMINATING COMPASSION?

A Review of AIDS. A Diocesan Response (Oxford: Oxford Diocesan Board for Social Responsibility, 1987), 28 pp, £1.00.

The Oxford Diocesan Board for Social Responsibility is to be commended for producing a succinct, lucid and considerate response to the problem of AIDS. The heart of AIDS. A Diocesan Response comprises four chapters. The first consists of a general report by the BSR itself. The second provides a clinical description by Dr. John Gallwey; the third, theological reflection by Canon Rowan Williams; and the fourth, consideration of the pastoral dimension by Sister Martha Reeves. These chapters are introduced by a preface written by the Bishop of Oxford; and they are followed by a summary of the main points and recommendations, an Appendix consisting of a Statement by the Archbishops of Canterbury and York on the use of the Chalice, and a select list of relevant services and literature.

The BSR and John Gallwey present an admirably intelligible account of what AIDS is and involves as a clinical phenomenon; an account that has the potential to exorcize some of the blinder terror which this matter conjures up. It is made perfectly clear, for example, that there is no evidence of risk of infection through casual everyday contact. And it is pointed out that it is by no means certain that all of those infected with HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus) or who, developing some of the minor symptoms of AIDS, suffer from ARC (AIDS-Related Condition), will necessarily develop the full AIDS syndrome.

The issue of the place of moral judgement in the Church's response to AIDS receives attention at several points. Both the BSR and Rowan Williams allow the importance of sexual ethics, but vigorously deny that the question of ethical norms should have any direct bearing on the care that is to be shown the AIDS sufferer. We who have gratefully received the Gospel of the God who has freely chosen to stand alongside us in our pathetic and guilty condition, have no business meting out our care according to the moral standing of our suffering neighbour. In its social distribution, Christian compassion must be morally indiscriminate.

The enemy here is moral self-righteousness: the 'judgemental' attitude that we display toward others, and which demonstrates just how feeble a grasp we have of the reality of our own situation before God. It is this same attitude that is in Rowan Williams' sights when he tackles the question of whether we can regard AIDS as a plague sent by God to punish the immoral — usually meant, in this context, to refer to the sexually promiscuous, especially those of homosexual orientation, and drug abusers. To this Williams offers two answers: first a No, and then a Yes. No, because the notion that victims of a disease might specially deserve God's wrath, strikes at the heart of the Gospel of the God who has freely aligned himself with wretched humanity; and also because not everyone suffering from AIDS does so because of their own immoral behaviour — e.g. haemophiliacs transfused with infected blood, or the babies of infected mothers. But he answers Yes, insofar as we speak not so much of divine punishment as of divine judgement, and insofar as we include ourselves in the ranks of those who are being judged. In other words, AIDS may be regarded as God's judgement, but a judgement upon the greed and impatience and self-seeking of us all; a judgement which brings into stark light the moral viciousness of common human behaviour by means of its undoubtedly evil effects.

Neither the BSR nor Rowan Williams argue that, in order to be compassionate, Christians need to abandon moral understanding. They do not wish to persuade us against holding a definite vision of the human good, of the ultimate fulfilment of human being, of real human being. Nor do they encourage us to desist from the ethical task of drawing out the implications for human

behaviour of this vision. They do not advocate that we jettison moral discrimination. This is heartening, because it is distressingly common to encounter in today's Church (and, perhaps, in Martha Reeves' simplistic contraposition of love and moral law) the failure to distinguish between, on the one hand, the making of a moral judgement and, on the other, the 'judgemental' wielding of that intellectual judgement in aggressive defence of the self's own moral reputation.

The BSR and Canon Williams are content (and, in the opinion of this reviewer, correct) to deny that ethical convictions (e.g. about homosexuality or sexual promiscuity) should prevent the generous demonstration of compassion. They do leave open, however, an important question: namely, in this matter, how do we bear witness to our vision of the human good and its implications for human behaviour, when those implications are critical of the behaviour of the AIDS victim? In the course of demonstrating deeply felt compassion for someone who has contracted AIDS through homosexual or casual sexual relations, must we not at some point and in some way give voice to our conviction (if it is our conviction) that such relations are actually obstructive of human fulfilment, ultimately conceived?

In order to answer this question, we would, of course, have to assess possible motives and manners. Why should I wish to make such a moral confession, and how would I make it? There is no reason to suppose that it must take the sadistic form of my force-feeding the sufferer with morality, in order to bolster my own (probably rather insecure) moral convictions. Love has been known to co-operate with sensitively applied candour. Indeed, it is questionable whether love worth its salt can operate without it.

But the bottom line is surely this: that moral convictions (and ethical 'liberals' have just as many of these as ethical 'conservatives') must find public expression to survive. When we believe something to be good or bad, we are not simply giving intellectual expression to a preference or a whim; we are asserting something about the nature of reality at some more or less general level. We are making a claim about what is true, about what kind of people we and our neighbours should seek to become, about what is good for us. It is a claim that is important for the ultimate quality of the lives of us concrete human beings. It is an important claim. And because it is important, we cannot deny it public expression without consequence. For what is important, we must declare; and by not declaring something, we deny its importance. Convictions that we keep to ourselves do not long remain convictions. To make a habit of not speaking the truth is to kill it.

So, then, given that we must not permit our moral judgement to determine which of the suffering shall receive our unstinting compassion—given that we must not permit moral discrimination to become social discrimination—where, when and how may we yet testify to what we believe to be good?

It is undoubtedly true that the only persons who could combine love with ethical candour are those who have first been led to look deep inside themselves. Only those who have put to rest the deep fear that AIDS tends to arouse, could possibly be in a position to love its victims freely and therefore candidly. Martha Reeves not only encourages us to explore those fears, but argues with trenchant force that we should recognise them as a major cause of the problem; for there is some reason to suppose that it is our fearful rejection of such as the homosexual that drives him to seek the neurotic comfort of the anaesthesia of sexual promiscuity.

The BSR makes the poignant remark that it is sad (one might say shameful) that fear of infection by the chalice sometimes appears to be the main focus of Christian reaction to AIDS. It and the Archbishops of Canterbury and York, make perfectly clear that there is no evidence of the risk of infection through the common cup. Ironically, the only risk that it poses is to those already with HIV or AIDS who might catch another virus infection that would penetrate their immune system. There is, then, no good reason for a general abandonment of the powerful positive symbol of the sharing of the common cup; and there is every good reason for avoiding the powerful negative symbol of abandoning it.

This Response to AIDS by the Oxford Diocesan BSR is brief and therefore leaves much unsaid. What it says briefly, however, bears with some theological weight upon the relevant pastoral points (in happy contrast to some of the recent productions of the BSR of the General Synod). For this reason, and because its readability and expense should present no obstacle to most members of the Church, it deserves to be widely read.

Nigel Biggar

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