

Religion and The AIDs Crisis: Historical Analysis of The AIDs Crisis and Its Impact on Gay Men's Faith



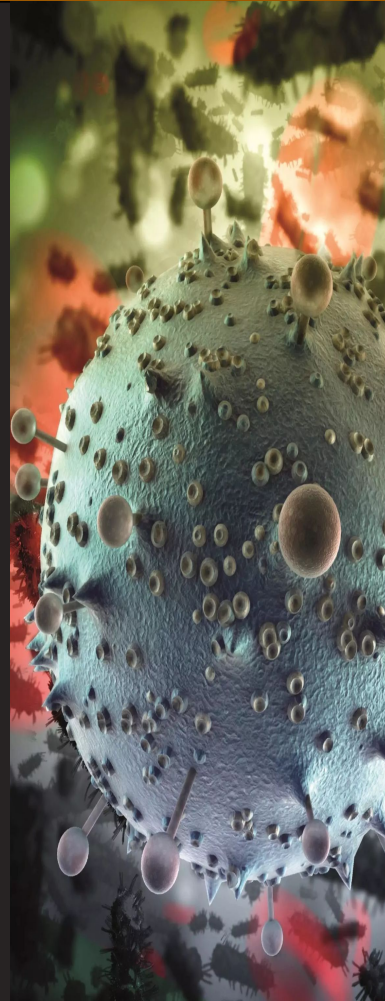
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Thesis

“I will argue that the events of the AIDS Crisis led to a mixed relationship of love, terror and hatred between gay men and religion. This is due to the prior knowledge of the conflicts with gay men and religion being apparent and leading a lot of men to stay away from organized religion, while also having the information that some have a strong connection to their faith even after experiencing the horrors that came with the AIDS Crisis. “

Background of the AIDS crisis

- What is HIV and AIDS
 - HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus)
 - “A virus that attacks cells that help the body fight infection”
 - AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome)
 - “Late stage of HIV infection that occurs when the body’s immune System is badly damaged because of the virus”
- Background of the AIDS crisis
 - Started in Los Angeles June 5th 1981
 - 5 young gay men diagnosed with rare lung disease, but having symptoms not related to the disease
 - Major symptom: immune system not working
 - Simultaneously cases appeared in New York and San Francisco
 - This was believed to be some form of cancer only affecting gay men
 - Lead to the nickname “gay cancer”
 - Was considered a death sentence at the time
 - “dealing with attitudes--the ‘homophobia’ of persons who regard AIDS patients as modern-day lepers. . . . Cancer has a lot of stigma, but it’s not attached to an individual, like AIDS is.” -Rev. Lee Hancock



Background of the AIDS crisis cont.

- Within the first 7 months 130 were already dead
- 1985 Ronald Reagan acknowledges AIDS for the first time
- 1987 first treatments are approved
 - Zidovudine and Azidothymidine (ZVD and AZT)
- 1994 AIDs becomes leading cause of death for Americans ages 25-44
- Now HIV is a treatable virus through medication preventing the development of AIDs, People being able to live a full life with HIV
 - Can be prevented through the use of PreP, taken before exposure
 - Can be prevented through the use of PeP, taken post exposure within a 72 hr window
- Even though cases have decreased for HIV and AIDS it is still a problem globally
 - Medication is expensive, and even though more accessible it is not obtainable to all



Pain Caused by Religion

- Two main negative influences
 - Direct influences
 - Religious leaders spoke out about gay men
 - “according to the scripture, and I believe that AIDS is God indicating his displeasure and his attitude toward that form of lifestyle, which we in this country are about to accept.” -Roman Catholic Cardinal Bernard Law
 - “While I would not, and could not, conclusively state that AIDS is the judgment of God, it is clearly one of the terrible consequences of a chosen lifestyle,” James C. Dobson, Focus on the Family
 - Believed that it was a punishment from God



Pain Caused by Religion cont.

- Indirect influences
 - Religion heavily impacted politics
 - Reagan used his position to uphold the wants of the conservative right and evangelical movement
 - “Family Values” were heavily pushed
 - “Family Values” can be defined by
 - Nuclear family consisting of a father, a mother, and their children
 - No pre marital sex
 - These “family values” would prevent politicians from:
 - Allowing access to STD testing
 - Sexual education
 - Acknowledging HIV and AIDS and how they were spread
 - Humanizing gay men



Compassion Shown by Religion

- Not all religious organizations harmed the gay community
 - One way they helped was showing compassion to the person infected with AIDS
 - Example: The House of Ruth
 - Was a portion of a Catholic Parish in Louisville Kentucky
 - Was started in the early days of the AIDS crisis
 - Assisted gay men with a variety of needs
 - Finding a doctor that would help them
 - Giving some money to help with bus fare
 - Assure those suffering with AIDS they are not alone
 - One of the biggest needs at this time was the reassurance that they were not alone
 - “Touch them please. Hug them if you can.”-Sister Driscoll



Compassion Shown by Religion cont.

- Religion also sought to help console those who were experiencing loss from the AIDS crisis
 - Many gay men not only experience loss of their friends and partners, but also lost their chosen family
 - Many gay men formed family groups that were not based off blood, but those who they were close too
 - Some gay men found comfort in the guidance religion could provide



Conclusion

- Religions' involvement in the AIDS crisis lead to some gay men being helped and other gay men being hurt
- Each religion was divided within itself
 - Ex: Not all Catholics acted the same way towards gay men
 - Protestants within the same denomination treated gay men differently
- Most of the stories of the men who passed during this time never got to be told



Sources

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