Editor’s Letter

Holier Than Thou

August 10, 2010 By Regan Hofmann

The relationship between religion and science has long been a delicate one, especially concerning the topic of HIV/AIDS. A difference in ideology is one thing. The world is complex; and who’s to say one belief system is more or less correct than another when it comes to issues of faith? But when religious ideology creates hazardous situations for individuals, nations and the world at large, there is good reason to question the validity of that ideology—and, as in the case of HIV, to pit blind faith against the empirical evidence offered by science.

Some spiritual doctrine stands in the way of health. Pope Benedict XVI’s stance on condoms prevents hundreds of millions of people around the world from using a proven form of prevention that can save their lives and the lives of others. Surely God would not want so many to suffer when it could be avoided.

Then there’s the twisted idea that devotion to a given deity can protect you. In particular, the ex-gay movement (found in different iterations in many religions) suggests that allegiance to the church’s so-called moral code (e.g., not being gay) will protect you from a life of not only sin, but also pestilence (particularly HIV/AIDS). The trouble is, biological agents such as HIV aren’t kept at bay by spiritual devotion. The sexual spread of HIV is stopped by condoms.

There is definitive research that shows when gay people do not have the support of their family or community, their health can suffer. Gay people are at higher risk for HIV/AIDS and other STIs, but counter to the propaganda of the ex-gay movement, these risks aren’t the result of being gay—they’re the result of stigma and discrimination. When gay people are rejected by society, they are less likely to have good self-esteem and make healthy, empowered choices. So, the ex-gay movement actually increases the chances that its subscribers will be at risk for HIV/AIDS.

The threat of HIV/AIDS is often used as an incentive for parents to enroll their children in programs aimed at “getting the gay out.” But our story “Thou Shalt Fear AIDS” shows the negative health impact of LGBT people struggling against their true nature.

Fortunately, it appears that at least on the ex-gay front, science is prevailing over religious dogma. It helps, too, when the leaders of the ex-gay movement prove to be far less holier than thou.

I was raised as an Irish Roman Catholic and have much regard for the power of faith and religion. I have seen firsthand how the leaders of many faiths and many churches serve as wonderful educators in their communities. It makes sense. We look to our religious leaders for guidance.

May we soon see an evolution of religious attitudes that incorporate the wonders of modern science and enable spiritual leaders to play a pivotal role in maintaining not only the moral health of those to whom they preach, but also the corporal health.

I often imagine what the world would be like if the pope decided to endorse condom use. I wonder how many lives would be saved. It’s one thing to want everyone to go to heaven. But it’s another to send them there on the fast track.

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