Strange Bedfellows

On the incompatibilty of spirituality and AIDS activism

April 1, 1997 By Daniel Mendelsohn

Unlike other great activist movements of the century, AIDS activism has been almost wholly devoid of spiritual inspiration or content. In this you might contrast it to, say, the quest for a free India, which (despite the violence it eventually midwifed) arose from Gandhi's commitment to nonviolence; or this country's civil-rights struggle, which took its inspiration from, and certainly owed much of its rhetorical flourishes to, Martin Luther King Jr.'s faith. This isn't to say the epidemic itself has not caused a reconsideration of spiritual values for many people, but that it has tended to be an effect of grappling with the virus rather than the cause of activist fervor. On the whole, it's been a secular affair.

Why? The most important reason is that the initial activist impulse arose in the gay community, whose members had long been exiled from the embrace of organized religion. Yet even today, so many years later, it's still impossible to try to assess the reasons for the lack of spirituality in today's AIDS movement without engaging the ongoing claims of incompatibility between homosexuality and most religions.

One sure sign the two continue to be strange bedfellows is that the tone of gay writing about faith and religion remains rather strained, to say nothing of downright tortured: An air of dank apology hangs, angel-like, over the subject. Just the title of one recent popular collection -- Wrestling With the Angel: Faith and Religion in the Lives of Gay Men -- suggests the extent to which the task of "reconciling" the "paradox" (as the jacket copy puts it) of being both religious and gay is a real, well, struggle. This sense of strained effort has been recently confirmed in some other, more ambitious works by some religious gay intellectuals who have, as it were, hit the mats with the angel only to come out rather bruised.

You think of Andrew Sullivan's 1995 opus Virtually Normal, in which the author's arguments for church acceptance of homosexuals (well, at least "well-behaved," monogamous homosexuals) doesn't wholly erase your realization that Sullivan himself has to buy into the church's view of homosexuality as a deficiency in order to make those arguments in the first place.

Indeed, the ancient and deeply rooted antipathy of Christianity toward homosexuality is unlikely to dissolve just because you try to redefine homosexuality as "natural," as Sullivan does, or because, as Bruce Bawer tried to argue in 1994, "Christianity, properly understood, isn't about hate; it's about love" (an insight that would surely have come as a surprise not only to countless Jews and

Muslims during the past few millennia, but to most medieval homosexuals).

In fact, one wonders if the initial unwillingness of gay AIDS activists to wed their movement to some kind of spirituality may not have been a blessing in disguise. (Especially if the alternative is this burgeoning new pseudospirituality, which expresses itself in the scented candles, angel paraphernalia and tiny books filled with greeting-card ruminations you see increasingly in upscale pharmacies in gay neighborhoods: A sort of St. Thomas Aquinas meets Enya.) AIDS has always been a matter of the flesh; combatting the disease called for energies that were purely humanistic, emphasizing the need for hard science and clear-eyed education. And in our increasingly fundamentalist era, a return to humanistic values may not be such a bad thing.

We seem, in fact, to be doing pretty well without God. Our slow but growing successes in the laboratories and in the courts seem to have come about without, er, Him. How appropriate it would be if gay rights and AIDS activism finally demonstrated the validity of the tenet prized by the pre-Christian societies for whom same-sex sex wasn't a burning matter: That man was the measure of all things. After all those centuries of throwing ourselves at God, maybe the healthiest thing we could do is to head where we're wanted, and go pagan.

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.
http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/strange-bedfellows