



Faith, Religion and HIV

Stigma is deadlier than the disease itself, and the top driver of HIV stigma, in my opinion, is the church. By “church,” I mean the general community of conservative believers of ANY religion and their body of viewpoints.

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This post by Katie Willingham (KatieAdsila), originally appeared on [The Well Project](#).

This will be one of my hardest blogs I’ve ever written. I know it’s a very delicate subject and I wish no offense to anyone, but my truth is my truth and my views on this subject are not for the faint. So please understand that this is my story alone.

I live in a very religious part of the country, the Deep South Bible Belt, Alabama, and I grew up going to church. I of course struggled with my faith and sexual and gender identity, but never gave up on trying to be a good Christian. I studied my bible daily, went to church if the doors were open, prayed every day, and had a close relationship with God.

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But things changed when I was diagnosed with HIV. Suddenly the majority of my church, whom I’ve known for most of my life, no longer wanted to attend the same church as me, and so most left. I felt so bad about driving everyone away that I left, and then people started coming back. After some time had passed I decided to try to go back again; the church was full of people now, but again I watched the congregation dissipate into a handful of family members. I got the hint that it truly was me who was unwanted, so I never returned.

Stigma is deadlier than the disease itself, and the top driver of HIV stigma, in my opinion, is the church. By “church,” I mean the general community of conservative believers of ANY religion and their body of viewpoints. I don’t mean any offense to anyone, but it’s true. Because of the church, HIV has been widely regarded as a “gay disease.” The church has greatly stigmatized the disease, but as it has become known that the disease affects more than the homosexual population, the stigma has yet remained the same. It’s often even considered to be your judgment for whatever sins you did to contract HIV in the first place.

This judgment from the church that accompanies HIV traumatizes people who live with it. Many are shunned by their families of faith and blood and excommunicated. This deeply scarring experience leads to severe depression and other serious consequences, but sadly is too common; I know from my own experience of being disowned. So, many choose to never disclose their status and instead hide their secrets from the very people they should be able to trust. And this deception is necessary if they want to continue to worship there in peace.

I've heard so many stories about people who disclosed their positive status to their church to their great regret. Were it not for evangelical dogma, and trans/homophobia, would HIV stigma even exist? Because transphobia and homophobia are creations of the church.

I was once a strong believer but have since lost my faith in the church and the Christian God. The actions of those who claim to be Christians have caused this. In fact, I don't believe the Christian church even exists anymore; if Christianity means to be Christ-like, then the church is dead for the most part. There are of course some exceptions and still some "Christians" left, but most have traded their God for a golden calf. Or should I say a golden escalator and golden locks? Christianity has now largely become the cult of MAGA, who have become violent terrorists against the LGBTQ community, political opponents, judges, election workers, and anyone else they may disagree with. The doctrines of love, charity, and forgiveness have been exchanged with a war mentality intent on "making liberals cry". This is not the God I believe in.

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I have struggled with what I believe and was a borderline atheist for a long time, but I am now coming to an understanding about my Creator that I can live with. I still believe in a God, just not the psychopathic god of war and damnation that so many people believe in. Many longtime believers have been forced into leaving their church because of the church's stigma against HIV; I'm not the only one. Trust me when I say it leaves a deep wound on the heart and soul.

Again, I beg pardon if I have offended you about your religion, but I cannot forsake what I have said, because it is my truth and my opinion, whatever it is. I don't hate Christians or Muslims or Jews. Like it says, "Love the saint but hate the misguided religion."

Jesus himself never condemned anything more than religion and hypocrisy. "Whitewashed tombs...full of dead men's bones" is what he called the "church" leaders of his time. I think he would be extremely disappointed in what the church has become today. But if he were here to say it, they'd probably kill him again, because there's nothing they hate more than a liberal.

Forgive me if I sound abrasive, I don't mean to, I have years of deep wounds from the church and religious people that have never healed, but still I keep trying to find a peace with my Creator; it's people I have trouble forgiving. This distrust of people affects every relationship and conversation I have, even if I already trust you. I think maybe a lot of my anxiety that I feel about talking, speaking, writing, communicating with people stems from my wounds, past inflicted by the church and its people. Now I only truly trust dogs, lol.

I guess when it comes to faith and HIV everyone is different. Some people become more religious after their diagnosis, but I fell away and that part of me died. Many people who live with HIV go through a similar journey because of church stigma against HIV.

I wish I could think of a satisfactory way to end this blog, but I can't. So I'll just finish by saying that if you have a peace with your religion then I'm happy for you, truly, but the truth is that the church has killed more people than this disease itself, and continues to do so in the name of their God. And I can't make peace with that.

The Well Project is a non-profit organization whose mission is to change the course of the HIV/AIDS pandemic through a unique and comprehensive focus on women and girls across the gender spectrum. Visit their website, <https://www.thewellproject.org>, to access fact sheets (English and Spanish), blogs, and advocacy tools, and to join a global community of women living with HIV.

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