

[Atlanta AIDS Assembly](#)

Category : [February 1999](#)

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PANDEMIC

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Have religions failed to serve sufferers?

The good news is that religious leaders finally met with AIDS professionals and scientists to confront fears and dogmas that plague US Christian churches in their efforts to help AIDS sufferers. The bad news is that the response of most religious groups to AIDS is pitiable, due, says Lutheran theologian Sherman Hicks, "To the oppressive Christian hallmark which says, 'I'm in and you're out.' "

Consider the story of a lifelong member of a Christian church who contracted the disease through a blood transfusion. His pastor asked him to leave. After the member pleaded for help, the leadership met, calling the man back days later. He was elated, sensing that his faith had, at last, found its healing heart. When he showed up, the same pastor informed the man that a collection had been taken among parishioners, who had a gift for him--a one-way ticket out of town! The man was crushed, as are many when abandoned by congregations fearing infection, or worse, interpreting the disease as God's just punishment for those who stray into the sins of promiscuity, homosexuality and drugs.

Atlanta organizers invited Ma Jaya Sati Bhagavati to welcome the 400 religionists and AIDS missionaries to the Carter Presidential Center in Atlanta, Georgia. Ma Jaya's savvy, heart-rending talk thundered from the streets --where this devout Hindu and one of America's most dynamic AIDS workers spends her days and nights--serving notice that this would not be an ordinary four days. Ma Jaya's light-filled and uninhibited bearing [see page 37], and her small army of professional, optimistic AIDS workers sharply contrasted the mostly despairing Christian and Jewish presence at the November 8-11 "AIDS and Religion in America" convocation sponsored by the Ford Foundation and ANIN, the decade-old AIDS National Interfaith Network (www.anin.org) which coordinates faith-based support for the disease. Hinduism Today was also invited. Our editor, Acharya Palaniswami, presented the Hindu outlook--grounded in the understanding of the soul's evolution through reincarnation--that to know of one's impending death is a blessing, for it allows time to make amends and prepare for a better birth.

Stories were legion, emotional, laced with personal pain and unforgiven anger. An African-American Baptist theologian told of an uncle, a life-long church-goer, who felt stigmatized by his pastor as he lay dying from AIDS. A Catholic nun chided a priest she witnessed blessing an AIDS patient from a hospital hallway, fearing to go nearer.

Participants railed at traditional faiths for responding cruelly and inadequately to AIDS, and for hiding behind moral qualms about a virus wrongly associated with gay men and drug users. Scientists spoke of the 40,000 Americans infected annually with HIV, the viral precursor to AIDS. Over 400,000 Americans have been killed by AIDS and related complications. The disease has spread beyond the gay subculture where it started in the US and, primarily through heterosexual transmission, has hit women, minority and low-income groups hardest. Prevention is the key if the epidemic is to be stopped, and that requires faith groups to confront openly the explosive subjects of sex and drug use. Even religious groups that do give care to AIDS sufferers--Catholics, for example--recoil at the idea of handing out condoms to teen-agers or giving clean needles to addicts.

India's next: Yale University's Dr. Michael Merson noted worldwide as many as 50 million people are infected, and by 2000, 60-70 million will be HIV⁺. Each day 16,000 new people are infected. India, now estimated to have 5 to 8 million with HIV, will become the world's worst, with 38 million HIV⁺ by

2005. Hindus everywhere must respond swiftly and fearlessly. Merson told Hinduism Today, "Tell the people of India that to confront the epidemic effectively we need to talk openly and factually about sexual matters. Cultural silence about the realities of sex in India will cost too many lives."

Can Mother's Milk Kill?

What's more counter-intuitive than the medical fact that mother's milk can be lethal? According to Dr. Gerald Pierone, Medical Director at the AIDS Research and Treatment Center in Eastern Florida, mothers who test HIV positive should know of the danger of transmitting AIDS to suckling infants. He says that 25% of infants born to AIDS mothers acquire it during the birth process when the blood-placental barrier is broken (not in the womb), though "monotherapy of AZT during labor and for two months for the newborn can reduce transmission to 8%."

Elective C-section birth can reduce transmission an additional 50%. Healthy infants remain at risk from their mother's milk, which like other body fluids contains the HIV virus, though in smaller amounts than blood. Dr. Pierone notes that the World Health Organization recommends different strategies for infected mothers. In the USA, where water is clean and childhood diseases mostly under control, WHO tells AIDS mothers not to breastfeed, but to use formula milk instead. But in undeveloped nations, WHO takes an opposite stand, advising mothers to suckle. Why? Because her milk provides natural protection against infant diseases, notably diarrhea, which is statistically more lethal there than AIDS.