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AIDS and the Heretical Imperative: The Outbreak of Truth

Valson Thampu

Printed with permission from AIDS: Heresy and Prophecy (New Delhi, TRACI, 1993)

Ethics are inseparable from a theology of religions. In this chapter of his book the author seeks to address the root causes and not merely the symptoms of this dreaded global scourge. What appears to be heretic is in truth prophetic.

Editor

Centuries ago, a Man died. He died rejected and condemned. He was crucified outside the city, the tent of man. He died a heretic. Some said his heresy was blasphemy. Others thought it was treason. Either as the Son of God or as the King of the Jews he was heretical to the current systems of belief. But some, like the woman of Samaria, thought he was a prophet ([John 4:19](#); [Matt. 16:14](#)).

A Christian is obliged to respond to the AIDS crisis. Equally, he is obliged to be a prophet-priest within this crisis. Not only to champion damage control and provision of care in the present, but also to point to the realm beyond the crisis is his mandate. That is the 'Well of Samaria' model. If Jesus were to be an ideal Christian social worker of our times, he would have drawn water from the well himself and offered the woman a drink. Not that the prophet should scorn the immediate needs of man. But he would be very foolish if he were, in the process, to forget that he is called to be a prophet. His task, first and foremost, is to help the woman to a truthful, ultimately valid understanding of what her real needs are, also how those needs can be met. The noble, charitable goal of drawing water for her from this well is a potential alternative to that prophecy. The basic need of that woman was to understand why she was unendingly thirsty, why she was unfulfilled. Five men already. Now a sixth. What [p. 61](#) chance does she have along this way? She might get infected from the seventh ... Even if she does not, this way of life is an outrage to the human being that she is. Her humanity is drowning in the very water that she thought would quench her thirst. She must move on to another level of existence ... There and there alone will she be safe ... So the Prophet spoke.

The occupational misfortune of the prophet lies in his relationship to the total culture of his time. He is under a heretical imperative. He cannot but disagree with its ideology. That is because the prophet stands at the conjunction of two orientations of life in a state of coexistent conflict. He is the spark resulting from the short circuit. The power-line of the Kingdom of God and that of the kingdom of man—the domain of culture—have made contact within him. One who is entirely within the Kingdom of God and is apathetic to the life of man immersed in contemporary culture, will not experience the prophetic fire. He is our mystic. One who is entirely naturalized within the kingdom of man, is hermetically sealed from the prophetic urge. He is our secularist. The prophet is a boundary-being. At the boundary he is not an 'on-the-fence phenomenon'. He is, rather, the ground swell under the boundary wall so that those who are walled out may be called in.

What about the domain of culture, then?¹ How does it appear from the prophetic standpoint? Culture is the realm of contingent creations. Man is the creator there. A garden, for example, is located in the sphere of culture; whereas a forest is in the domain of nature. Human creativity is both an expression of the Fall and a protest against it. But it is a protest that only expresses the Fall. Hence culture is an embodiment of contradiction. This, however, man refuses to confess. In the excitement over the size and scope of his creations, he pretends to be *the* Creator. He plays god. As the new god, he must delight in his creations. Even God did the same. He beheld his creation stage by stage and kept on exclaiming: 'Good ... Good ... Good' ([Gen. 1:4](#), [10](#), [12](#), [18](#), [25](#)). But no man can have pretensions to pure creativity; he can create only on the foundations of what God has already accomplished.

Soon after his Fall, Adam felt the *need* to create. He was *compelled* to create. So the fig-tree lost some of its leaves. (Since then trees have been losing leaves very rapidly. That is the history of our Green-issues. Literary critics may please note that the tree in Beckett's play, *Waiting for Godot*, has no leaves). Man was, thus, taking his first, faltering steps

¹ For a stimulating discussion on this theme see H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (London: Faber & Faber, 1949), pp. 46–53.

towards the domain of culture. So the very first thing that Cain does after killing his brother Abel is to found a *city* ([Gen. 4:17](#)). But man is himself a part of creation. He can never be an end in himself. So God abides with man even in his exile. The tunic of skin that God makes for Adam is its first reassuring expression. God clothes physical man ... God envelops the spiritual man. This is part of the [p. 62](#) universal intuition of man. It is this truth that St. Paul proclaims in his Sermon on the Mars Hill at Athens: a true cross-cultural proclamation:

From one man God made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. *For in him we live and move and have our being. As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring'* ([Acts 17:26–28](#)).

Faith cannot locate itself entirely within the domain of culture. Religion is faith socialized and institutionalized. But religion imperils itself by coinciding totally with culture in vision and values. Faith as religion must exist in a socio-cultural matrix. But it must be vigilant against a purely cultural definition of its human vocation. Prophetic Faith judges culture. It does so by standing on a specific understanding of the nature and orientation of the culture-creating man. That is the prophetic vocation in a Faith. If Faith is totally socialized as religion, that religion becomes an appendix of the prevailing culture.²

Why should Faith judge culture? Freud offers a flash of insight when he observes that the neurotic man has a need to be the *builder of cities*. He builds institutions and infrastructures. They are, at best, only *necessary evils*. We create the State, says Freud, to oppress us. That is the irony of the domain of culture as man walks into nature as his new chosen home. Man hiding himself in the bush ([Gen. 3:7](#)) is a symbol of this. Culture is a sequel to this altered orientation. Every advance in culture tends to blur man's memory of his original home. Every step further along this road is a further degree by which man sinks into nature. With the ascent of the man of advanced culture, Adam's bush becomes a mighty forest. That forest is an improvement on the bush as a hiding place from God. That is so at least from the standpoint of human logic. Of course we have a problem if God is omnipresent. Then the wild forest could be, to him, a little bush. So we persuade ourselves to believe either that God does not care or that he does not exist. Our word for that forest is secularism.

The prophet addresses himself to the wilful self-delusions of this forest: our dream achievement of this secular-materialistic culture. That is the ultimate heresy. This message is worth proclaiming even at the risk of one's life. For it is life that is at stake, anyway. Even culture itself is at stake; for it could lose itself within its self-contradictions. Without its inner [p. 63](#) religiousness, Spengler points out, a culture 'loses its spiritual fruitfulness for ever; and *building* takes the place of begetting.'³

THE HERESY OF PROPHECY

² It was this aspect that was lost in the sociological approach to Christianity. Ernest Troeltsch effected a virtual equation between Christianity and the Western culture. That, unfortunately, paved the way for the demoralization of the missionary movement. If Christ is now realizable only in and through the genius of the Western culture, as it is represented by the European missionary, how can there be missions that do not constitute an aggression on other cultures? That, in a different way, is also the basis presupposition in Max Weber (See *The Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism*, London: George Allen and Unwin, 1930).

³ Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, vol. I (New York: 1932), p. 359.

Now, the prophetic message sounds heretical mainly in two ways. The message of the prophet, in the first place, questions the presuppositions of the age. The prophet exposes the fallacies of all man-made goals and ideologies that stand in the way of man fulfilling his vocation as man. His vocation, that is, as a creature called upon to glorify the Creator. The prophet thus clashes, necessarily, with the creed of the times. At a time when Judaism is absolutely convinced that Sabbath is more important than man, he comes along and upsets the applecart ([Mark 2:27](#)). When the Pharisees have persuaded themselves that they are the visible saviours, he comes along and calls them 'whited sepulchres' ([Matt. 23:27](#)). And so on. That is the anti-Establishment heresy.⁴ This he does, not to thrive on it; for he knows that no prophet will be acceptable to his own people ([Matt. 13:57](#)). But he risks himself, being gripped by truth.

The second source of prophetic shock is because of the total irrelevance, as it would seem to the pragmatists, of the prophet's response to the felt need of the hour. Surely the woman of Samaria did not go to Jacob's well to be lectured. From the utilitarian point of view, the empty, abandoned pot beside the well looks like the debris of a subverted mission. Jesus 'pulled a fast one' on her, if you like. Water, not words, is what a thirsty person needs. You can't, moreover, cook your rice or wash your clothes with words. The preference for words over water was the preacher's prejudice. The woman was the victim. Is anyone safe from these Christian preachers?

Take a similar situation in [Mark 2:1-12](#).⁵ It appears to be the height of impertinence for Jesus to say to the paralytic: 'Son, your sins are forgiven you' (verse 5). Is there any transparent connection, as far as anybody can see, between the objective need of the man and the response of the prophet? Within the established logic of the situation, the prophet is acting as a heretic. (Ask any doctor, if you are not convinced.) But the impertinence of the prophet, his incurable heretical disposition, is due to his saving insight that there is a subjective, hidden reality behind this objective, apparent disability. The practical man, the shallow mind, insists on a divorce between the objective and the subjective. Having fled from the crucial sphere of his own subjectivity, the p. 64 realm of his freedom and fellowship with God, he champions the sole relevance and reality of the objective, empirical realm. That is the journey from the sacred to the profane. We move from the sanctuary, the tabernacle of God, to the social and the secular. We then have to persuade ourselves that God and our subjectivity do not exist; or that outside the small niches we have allocated, God is not real. Then the secular man is born and he claims the word minus the temples. The world-conquering secularist is then carried to the temple on a pallet. He has lost the capacity to be. All he can say now is: 'I can't help it'!

A SLAVE OF TRUTH

The prophet is not a 'free man'. He cannot oblige you with pleasant fiction. If you went to him with ears itching for popular myths he would refer you, even discourteously, to the secular man. He may even recommend an AIDS conference! The prophet has a definitive message. (He is, from your point of view, *very* dogmatic.) His order of priorities will offend you. 'Son, your sins are forgiven you.' Then only, 'take up your bed and walk'. (Does not

⁴ Cf. Rabbi 'Joseph Klausner's thesis in his book *Jesus of Nazareth* that Jesus imperilled the Jewish civilization, by looking for the establishment by the divine power of a 'Kingdom not of this world'. If he had attempted only to reform the religious and national culture, there would have been no problem. 'Jesus ignored everything concerned with material civilisation; in this sense he does not belong to civilisation'—as quoted by R. Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, pp. 19–20.

⁵ See Appendix II.2, for the full text of this passage.

even bother to lend a hand, this hard-hearted man!) The Christian prophet-propagandist will do well to make a note of this. First things first.

All this is sure to sound like the very heartbeat of heresy, especially to a culture fleeing from responsibility and moral freedom. But this heresy is the minimum awareness programme from the biblical perspective. The Christian finds himself in an unenviable situation of unavoidable heresy in the AIDS scenario of secular understanding and strategy.

THE CULTURAL INVASION

The global response to AIDS has so far been entirely dominated by the North American and European assumptions and goals. The prescriptions and remedies recommended to the rest of the world must be assessed in this light. It is not often realized that they need not sound as plausible and helpful in Asian and African situations as they do elsewhere. And if the cultural and ethical offence has not been sufficiently resented yet, it should not be concluded on that basis that the inclusions and conclusions of the current AIDS discourse are acceptable *in toto* to the whole world. It is true, however, that the voice of protest is not heard enough.

And that not without any reason. The professional and cultural elite in the developing countries have exercised an absolute monopoly over the so-called scientific and professional responses to this crisis. It is an open secret that a great majority of them, if not all, are the co-opted members of the Western club in their vision and intellectual discipline. The growing internationalism of the elite in these countries has weakened their cultural roots and religious persuasions. It should not surprise us if they find all the dominant, secular assumptions about life totally acceptable. This is a socio-anthropological problem of grave consequence and merits closer scrutiny. The practical implications of this fact for the developing Afro-Asian nations vis-a-vis p. 65 the AIDS control strategy are what concern us here. It is a matter of considerable irony that the present situation of global panic and anxiety has provided the ideal opportunity *for furthering the cultural paradigm of the Western world throughout the world*. It is very likely that this was not the primary or even peripheral goal, but is a purely accidental one. But that does not minimize the devastation in this ethico-cultural carnage.

This is not to ascribe ulterior motive to anybody. This is only to recognize the reality that the HIV/AIDS crisis is hitting us at several points. We have come under this accidental infiltration of alien values and assumptions at a critical stage in our socio-cultural self-definition. We are a society in flux. The modern secular-materialistic culture, with all its genius for invasive dominance, has begun to inject its energies into our society. Our old ethical and cultural way of life is now under siege. Despite the rapid rise of the urban culture, with all that goes with it, our traditional strengths of the family and interpersonal relationship have survived. In all this, the hated words, 'inhibitions' and 'morality', have played, so far, a sustaining role. Now some are beginning to feel that all this is so much useless bother; an infringement on their personal freedom.

CONSULTATION VS. DIALOGUE

There is, unfortunately, no cross-cultural dialogue in the HIV/AIDS context. That must seem surprising, given the plethora of international consultations and workshops. The fact that 'experts' from Asia and Africa are 'participating' in a particular consultation does not contradict this observation. That is because these 'experts' are the roofless coopted elite from these countries. By training and experience they are part of an international

network that is dominated by the ideology and world view of a particular bloc. The scope of the experts from developing countries often amounts to their role, unwittingly perhaps, as salesmen of the programmes and approaches of the dominant ideological bloc. It is strange, but understandable, that Indian experts have a missionary zeal for implementing the AIDs strategies as fashioned in the West. Most of them exhibit the same indignation that their Western counterparts would, when the assumptions underlying these strategies are questioned, and that, in spite of the most glaring disparities between societies in question. To put it bluntly, *some of our awareness programmes would appear to attack our sense of modesty, and public sensitivity, more than they attack the virus itself!*

NOT CONFIDENT ABOUT CONFIDENTIALITY

One of the major ethical debates in the AIDS scenario has been on the issue of confidentiality. The postulate that 'unlinked, anonymous testing' is the basic right of the individual, is a good example of it. It is more or less clear to us that in a society with a highly developed culture of the primacy of individual rights, this goal makes good sense. But in societies that have traditionally **P. 66** subordinated individual rights to corporate rights, the unmodified insistence on the same principle becomes an alienating factor. Surely we cannot arbitrarily assume that the goals of individualism alone are valid and civilized; and that a community-orientated culture that must curb the absolute claims of the individual is primitive and unjust. The two are distinct cultural paradigms that create their own orbits of values and goals. The goals from within one paradigm may seem cruel or quixotic to the other. The summary ridicule and rejection of these goals and sensitivities is a form of aggression.

Also, no cultural goal or principle can ever be absolute. The right to confidentiality is a case in point. It is a contingent and circumscribed value. And that is so, both in the East and West. But can it be an absolute goal in either? Should not the absoluteness of the man's right to confidentiality be circumscribed by his wife's right to life? Right to confidentiality is, ironically, even more crucial in an orthodox and taboo-oriented society. There the infected individual is at greater risk of socio-economic hurts. That is so at least in principle. But Eastern societies, that happen to be under far greater resource constraints and survival struggles, cannot afford to run risks in the interest of individual rights. These societies that are already overstretched in the struggle for survival cannot afford to take on additional burdens imposed by individualistic claims. Nor do they have the resource resilience to absorb the strain to themselves, in case the individuals happen to precipitate crises in the course of exercising their rights. These are the ground realities that claims of relative superiority must take cognisance of.

NEEDLING A STERILE IDEA

A word about the idea of distributing sterile syringes and needles among the drug-addicted may be in order. This idea too is beset with similar contradictions. It is seldom taken into account that—

1. The concept is not economically viable.

Separate allocation of substantial funds would be called for. Even if that is done, such positive discrimination in favour of the drug addicts will stand out rather awkwardly in a country where the basic health-needs of millions of people are not met. It is not just a single wave of distribution that is involved. The supply has to be sustained over time.

2. It is not pragmatic.

Assuming that the economic hurdle is overcome, we shall still be left with the impracticality of this scheme as a mass-based solution. The problems are twofold. First, the mere distribution of the syringes and needles will not do. The crucial factor will be the inculcation of the required motivation to maintain ideal standards of sterility or safety. Such motivation is, essentially, a pro-life motivation; whereas drug addiction is an anti-life activity. It would be simplistic to underestimate the difficulties involved in overcoming the basic pull of the addiction in order to establish a force [p. 67](#) counter to its direction. If a mechanical illustration is permissible, one would say, it is like changing a fast, forward moving vehicle into reverse gear. Yet, if the motivational factor is not taken care of sufficiently, it is not unlikely that the needles and syringes thus distributed will all be sold so as to make some quick money which the addicts need at all times.

Secondly, sharing the needles among members of the same group is of ritualistic significance. The same equipment is used, in other words, not simply because additional syringes and needles cannot be bought. If poverty were the one and only cause for the sharing of needles, the proposed idea would have some chance. We need to take into account the fact that it is not merely the drug that the addicts of a well-defined group inject. Each time the drug is injected, a small quantity of blood is withdrawn from the drug user. That is then mixed with the drug and pushed into the next person. This is essentially a cultic practice that covenants the cohesion and oneness of the group. The commingling of blood has strong emotional significance. Given the deep psychological needs of the addicts for the creation of an intimate and committed community, the awareness campaign is unlikely to alter this practice among the addicts. If that is so, it would not matter whether or not sterile equipment is distributed to them.

3. It has legal contradictions.

Legally, the very concept is absurd. It laughs at us most cynically. The peddling, possession and consumption of these drugs are all serious offences. But the virus will be allowed to infect law also. The substance and its use will be criminal; the means to use it will be legal and legitimate! It is almost like saying: having an unlicensed gun is illegal; killing also is: but you will be trained by the State in sharp shooting. Can we provide the means without legitimizing both the substance and the consumption of it? Shall we officially distribute sterile syringes and needles with the left hand and arrest the prospective users with the right hand, as the law requires us to do, for drug-related offences or shall we amend the penal code and make drug abuse licit? Shall we drop the expression 'drug abuse'?

Or shall we also ask why we are not making enough progress in the drive against drug addiction? Viewed in complete isolation, the idea of sterile syringes and needles appears to be a feasible one. It is certainly an improvement on having to take on the drug mafia. Surely it appeals more to the bureaucratic imagination than the prospect of grappling with unemployment, boredom and drift among the youth. We are concerned only with HIV; other issues of life and death don't matter to us. We shall target the HIV and hit the bull's eye with the sterile needle. Never mind, if in the process the killer drugs are publicly baptized into legitimacy!

So much for the wisdom that is peddled in these AIDS conferences and campaigns. So much also for the saving wisdom that is being imported into this society by the keepers of its sanity! [p. 68](#)

The Eastern societies too, like Western societies, have salient features and characteristic strengths. They have their underlying assumptions and overt values. The life of a person is home-centred. Home and relationships are sacred. There are inhibitions

about intimate behaviour. There are don't's, that is. One is held responsible for what one does. Sometimes a whole village is held responsible, if the offender does not own up. Faithfulness in relationships, and self-sacrifice to make them work, are great values. Human urges can be mastered. Gandhiji's vows of abstinence and purity in the context of the struggle for independence, for example, inspired the entire people of India? All this is brushed aside by the AIDS education and awareness campaign.

THE SECULAR LIE

Christians, and all those who believe in the dignity and moral freedom of man, must not be intimidated by the seeming plausibility of the present AIDS polemic. They should believe in their freedom and duty to humanity and recognize that in the name of progress and survival, life is being vulgarized and trivialized. A false image of man as a crude biological mechanism, a sensual animal, is being institutionalized. This must be protested against even if it is only an accidental byproduct. They should uncompromisingly insist on the minimum saving hypocrisy obtained in other sectors of public life. Cigarettes, for example, can be sold only with the statutory warning 'Smoking is injurious to health'. Pharmaceutical drugs too come with 'warnings'. How come condoms and sterile syringes can be distributed for AIDS control without any message or warning?⁶ Shall we return to a life in nature at the cost of our moral freedom, or human dignity? And that, without a word of protest? This warning is unlikely to be issued by the purblind secular world. It can be pronounced, if at all, as the prophecy of the Church to man at the present time.

The Christian, thus, finds himself under an urgent and hazardous obligation—an obligation comprehended under the duty enjoined on prophet Ezekiel:

Son of man, I have made you a *watchman for the house of Israel*; so hear the word I speak and *give them warning* from me. When I say to a wicked man, 'You will surely die', and you do not warn him or speak out to dissuade him from his evil ways in order to save his life, that wicked man will die for his sin, and *I will hold you accountable* for his blood ([Ezek. 3:17–18](#)).

ETHICAL EXHAUSTION

The pathos of the current secular-scientific 'ethical realism' is that it is the product of our ethical exhaustion. It is a kind of idealism grown senile; idealism that has given up on **P. 69** itself. Its true name is cynicism, which is the confession of personal, and generic, inadequacy in relation to an ideal. That confusion should awaken in us infinite compassion. But compassion is not indulgence or pandering. It is love and truth in a state of dynamic embrace. It is dynamic because it urges us to specific tasks. But energy needs to be truth-directed, held in shape and meaning and beauty. Truth without love produces abstractions. Love without truth is at best fecundity or at worst, demonic sex.

Human experiences make sense within an organic whole. There is no self-contained, autotelic activity in the human sphere. The part cannot pretend to be the whole, but derives its meaning and value from its participation in the whole. The moment the part attempts to be self-contained, it becomes subversive. That is the pitfall of individualism.

⁶ I would propose the following message for the condom. 'Casual sex is risky. Both for body and soul. You CAN abstain from it and be safe. But if you are too weak to withstand—why should you?—use this. But there is *no absolute guarantee*. This may minimize the risk.' (Brevity may be the soul of wit, but it does not serve the cause of 'safer sex'. The more our indulgent generation reads—or develops some serious interests—the stronger it becomes against this weakness!)

Can sex be indulged in for its own sake? We need not leap to the simplification that reproduction is the only biblical goal of human sexuality. That would be very untrue. But as Christians, we are concerned no doubt at the exclusively physical and chemical interpretation of human sexuality.

A WIFE IN THE DEVIL'S NAME?

Let us take an illustration from that 'blasphemous, atheistical' man Christopher Marlowe, the sixteenth-century playwright. His character, Dr. Faustus, was man enough to abjure God and renounce the moralisms, if you like, that inhibited his personal freedom. One instance of such freedom was the right to have a wife at will. Mephistopheles brings him a 'wife, in the name of the devil'. She turns out to be a 'hot whore'. And why not? If love is a matter only of amoral physicality, of bio-chemical sensations, why should the ethical stature of the object of love matter? At the level of the value-neutral impulse-release alone, the prostitute is a one-night wife, or the wife a long-term dependable prostitute. Dr. Faustus discovers that a wife can be had only 'in God's name'. It is a discovery that secular man needs to rediscover today. There are signs that he would. That is, if he approaches constructively and radically, the anxiety that is welling up within him.

The denizens of developing countries have a great advantage in this respect. By separating fact from fiction in the predicament of their counterparts in the developed world, by appropriating the wisdom and moral of modern man's journey through secular history, they can identify the road they should *not* take. Western man, in later times, can give the excuse of having been taken for a ride; of having been promised fish and given a serpent, ([Matt. 7:10](#)). It may sound fairly convincing. If those in Africa or Asia walk the same road and fall into the same fatal manholes, they would stand condemned by history for wilful blindness. The same would apply also to a Christian anywhere in the world, who makes light of the 'still small voice' in the Bible and within his conscience that goes on saying, 'This is not the way'. Or, to put it positively, Jesus said, 'I am the Way' ([John 14:6](#)).

Valson Thampu, a member of the TRACI community is a lecturer and the Chaplain at St. Stephens College, Delhi, India. [p. 70](#)

Book Reviews

DISSONANT VOICES: RELIGIOUS PLURALISM AND THE QUESTION OF TRUTH

by Harold A. Netland

(Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1991, 323 pp.)

(Reviewed by Ramesh Richard)

Harold Netland, missionary to Japan and assistant professor of religious studies at Tokyo Christian University substantively addresses a most pivotal issue for evangelicalism. Indeed, the very denotation of the word 'evangelical' hinges around a biblically faithful, logically consistent and sociologically relevant reading of the topic of religious pluralism.