

# *A Symposium—Global Ethics on HIV/AIDS: Perspectives from the Religions and the Sciences*

THE PROSPECT OF A GLOBAL ETHIC ON HIV/AIDS:  
THE RELIGIONS AND THE SCIENCE-AND-RELIGION  
DIALOGUE

*by James F. Moore*

*Abstract.* This article introduces essays from a 2001 symposium on a global ethic and the issue of the spread of HIV/AIDS. The symposium began with the assumption that we can determine the possibility for such a global ethic if we both explore the potential of an interreligious dialogue and do so in the context of a science-and-religion dialogue. I argue that while the possibilities for a global ethic, in particular addressing the issue of HIV/AIDS, may be debated, the results of this symposium suggest that the dialogue ought to be continued and that there is significant potential in the interfaith dialogue for creating models for both an ethic and specific strategies for action.

*Keywords:* disease; global ethic; globalization; HIV/AIDS; interfaith dialogue.

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The spread of HIV/AIDS has occurred at such an alarming pace that we are now ready to call this a pandemic, and the destruction is so severe in some areas of the globe that many have given up hope that any effective

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response can turn the tide. The articles in this section are refinements of presentations made at the first annual Zygon Center Symposium on HIV/AIDS, held in September 2001, at which scholars from a variety of disciplines and religious traditions addressed the theme "The Potential of an Interfaith Science-Religion Dialogue on HIV/AIDS." The speakers took as the basis of our discussion three critical assumptions: first, that the religions can talk together and in doing so can work toward a level of agreement on critical issues that confront us; second, that a religious perspective informed by scientific knowledge and scientific theory and practice informed by religious thinking can be produced by a dialogue between religionists and scientists with the effect that both are better prepared to respond adequately to global crises; and third, that any assessment of our reflections—that is, that both conversations actually produce progress toward an ethic (some might talk of a global ethic) that is both understandable and workable—must be tested by a case that challenges us to be concrete and to consider all questions. These three assumptions form the structure of this essay's attempt to link the various articles in this issue in a way that can show the way forward in this discussion.

#### DOES INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE WORK?

The test of the success of any interreligious dialogue remains the actual face-to-face encounter between adherents of the various religious traditions. Of course, we can argue that such dialogue can have a range of goals with which to measure success. Participants in this symposium were asked to reflect not only on the potential of the science-and-religion dialogue for constructing a global ethic but also on how our discussion about that is affected by both a multireligious dialogue and a focus on the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Such engagement required that participants take seriously both their own contributions from their various religious perspectives and the potential of coming together on an ethical vision.

Norbert Samuelson's contribution surely takes seriously the specific contribution of Judaism to the discussion. His view is, however, less enthusiastic about the possibility of some joint vision. On the matter of HIV/AIDS, Samuelson wonders openly about whether there is any real uniqueness to the current situation, especially with respect to the Jewish traditional approaches for understanding disease and epidemic. The other discussion, about the possibility of a global ethic, leads him to the striking conclusion that the whole effort threatens to undo the specific character of the traditions, which, in his view, form the best possible resource for dealing with ethical, practical matters such as disease.

V. V. Raman is more optimistic about the dialogue. He is more inclined to see that dialogue does not need to function on the basis of boundaries that define our differences but rather can move forward quite successfully

by finding common ground. This sharing of vision does not for him and his understanding of Hinduism threaten the integrity of the traditions themselves. The difference of view in this group of articles is seen as well in Gordon Kaufman's, which sees the world of science presenting the challenge for a revised view of reality and a new language for the religions already leading us in new directions. This new direction has potential for both the task of forming a global ethic and for specific approaches to HIV/AIDS, according to Kaufman, but requires openness to radically new thinking in all the traditions.

This challenge from Kaufman is echoed in the final essay from Philip Hefner, who wonders from his own Christian perspective about the language of universals that is so characteristic of religions. Perhaps, he argues, this shift can help us create new visions without getting trapped in what are often seen as pitfalls of globalization, particularly the likelihood of the dominant West setting the agenda of the conversation. He is more interested, however, in setting forth a series of possible programs for thinking and research that can be the test of a long-term interreligious dialogue wanting to contribute to the science-and-religion dialogue. Among these is the possibility of doing something that he argues has yet to be done: construct an interreligious theology of disease built on the most current information we have available from the sciences.

#### THE SCIENCE-AND-RELIGION DIALOGUE

If we have before us the challenge of interreligious dialogue on HIV/AIDS and a science-and-religion dialogue going on simultaneously, we face the difficult task of creating a format that allows the different discourses to be heard and negotiated in the dialogue. Gayle Woloschak's article shifts the focus to a scientific perspective while remaining sensitive to religious language and viewpoints. Detailed analysis of the current state of research effectively provides the information we need to rethink our views toward a theology of disease. Of course, the process of rethinking is profound, now that the scientific view of diseases like HIV/AIDS has moved past the simplistic notions that there are simple causes and thereby clear solutions (or paths to find the solutions). This view is shaped by the dramatic change in perspective brought by a neo-Darwinian evolutionary perspective, which applies to the micro as well as the macro world.

In addition, the scientific approach to diseases is shaped by an ecological perspective, which changes any sense of whether there can be lasting solutions to any perceived problem. The world of microorganisms in symbiotic relation to the macro world of humans is an ongoing, shifting, complex relationship that depends on both global and local factors. Naturally, coming to terms with both evolutionary and ecological views of contemporary science is one of the key challenges for our effort to shape a global

ethic tested by the case of dealing with HIV/AIDS. This may mean that whatever we mean by universals, which emerge from religious traditions, must be different from what this notion has meant in the past. The test is whether religions can reshape their thinking to account for this shift in the scientific viewpoint.

Surely, Barbara Strassberg's article addresses this need from a sociologist's perspective, drawing on the idea of "moral competence" taken from, among many, Zygmunt Bauman. Strassberg determines that the shift in thinking all the more requires what Bauman calls the morally competent subject, the individual with the capacity to act with wisdom in the face of ethical challenges, likely in concert with institutional structures. In our times we are realizing the need and the possibility of the individual agent becoming a catalyst for change and the locus of action. On the other hand, such competence is likely also measured by levels of literacy. This means not just moral literacy that may be connected to religious traditions and communities but also literacy in the sciences. The challenge, for the agent, becomes integrating these literacies into a base for moral action.

#### HIV/AIDS

The essays included in this issue of *Zygon* are a prelude to a longer discussion that is ongoing. Even so, the contours of the future are already seen in outline form in these articles. If we are focused on HIV/AIDS, we need to take seriously the larger context for this disease, and this means clearly understanding both the scientific information available to us (which is emerging each month with new discoveries) and the social networks of relationships that form both the local settings and the global picture of a pandemic. The religions can and must address this specific case with this full awareness, especially if the main ethical issue continues to be, for most, a matter of behavioral change. The religions, though, may be challenged in the way that both Kaufman and Hefner argue to shift ground to a new kind of vision before an effective approach can be suggested for either our understanding of HIV/AIDS specifically or for whatever specifics we can promote for behavior. It is a daunting task but such an important one that we dare not back away. The conversation foreshadowed in these essays is an exciting prospect.