

Preface

This preface carries two signatures: for the first time, our two journals, *Lumière et Vie* and *New Blackfriars*, have produced together a special issue and publish it simultaneously, each in its own language and almost identical.

The angry press exchanges resulting from a controversial programme on AIDS transmitted on British television only a few weeks ago reminded us that even now seemingly well-established facts about the nature of the disease can be argued about, although shortly afterwards came an announcement that an AIDS vaccine should be out in only two years' time. AIDS is so 'political' that it is hard for a layperson to know how near we actually are to the truth. And controversy is not limited to the nature of the disease itself. Articles by French and British authors on Christian reactions to the spread of AIDS are mixed in the following pages, to show how an identical question presents itself in these two countries, how Christians meet the same problem differently, depending on their culture, and how, in the name of the same Gospel, they find different responses.

Ten years ago we in the northern world thought that the times of great epidemics were in the past; grave illnesses still afflicted us, but the triumphs of medicine continued and life expectations lengthened. In 1982 a word wiped out these illusions: AIDS. The experts agree that it is the most serious health problem of our age. Already for some African countries the figures are frightening, and nobody can calculate exactly what will be the repercussions on demography, economics, even the future of certain societies. These issues, however, fall outside the limits of our current number.

'Why special issues of your journals on AIDS particularly?' writes a regular reader who has himself 'suffered for many years from an incurable disease which has caused more deaths than AIDS is ever likely to do'. But AIDS is not a malady like others. Most of those whom it strikes are young. Also, it draws concentric circles in our societies: at the core, already many thousands of victims; beyond, a great number who are already incurably sick; further, hundreds of thousands of people who are HIV Positive (those who know they are and those who don't), for whom life is now overshadowed by a strange menace and who—if they are aware of their condition—cannot live 'as before'. Their sexual behaviour is affected; they cannot produce children except at the risk of passing the virus on to them; they face the fears and rejections of society. Finally, the epidemic concerns tens of millions of people of sexually-active age who cannot feel totally immune except by changing certain of their behaviour.

Even so, does that justify two theological reviews together producing a special issue dedicated to AIDS? Yes, because this epidemic raises new problems to a degree hitherto unknown. We are certainly not competent to speak on the centrally-important medical research in progress. But Christians are concerned when sexuality, the seat of life, has become a possible place of death; when many, both the young and (now more often) the not so young, seem still to be unaware that certain practices put their lives in danger; when so many people, struck at the very deepest level, must rediscover their whole way of life; when the sick or those close to them are on a road of suffering and often seek in vain for comfort; when irrational fears circulate and, to the physical and psychological trials caused by the virus itself, add the experience of being discarded and judged by a part of society. The Churches are themselves touched when certain of their members enter this way of suffering; Christians, confronted by AIDS, may not enjoy at a distance some divine immunity.

Who would dare to claim that the Churches straightway found what was the just position to take, what were the attitudes conforming to the message of the Gospel? If generosity and compassion abound in their breasts—this special issue contains evidence of this—it is also known that the Churches have often appeared on the side of those who judge and reject, or of those who undermine vitally necessary campaigns. (For example, the noisily activist American organisation ACT UP — the Aids Coalition To Unleash Power — sees the Roman Catholic Church to be one of the institutions guilty of having slowed down attempts to treat the disease and prevent its spread.) The strongest initiatives to fight against the virus and to help those inflicted by it have not come from the Churches. In the great ethical debate which the arrival of AIDS has triggered off and which concerns our whole societies, Christians have still to play a serious part.

The fight against AIDS is multiform. Our journals have united to contribute modestly to it from their own resources: to help in the formation of consciences, to make known some unobtrusive practices of charity, to provide a space for thinking which takes its inspiration from the Gospel and would wish to contribute something in this testing time.

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Lumière & Vie

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New Blackfriars