

AIDS And Us

Conservative groups in various countries throughout the Arab world continually protest against the low moral standards of the West. The priority on their cultural agenda is the rejection of the immediate and long-term threats posed by the indiscriminate importation and adoption of western secular values. Western-bashing and the upholding of our own superior ethical mode of life have thus become favorite topics of conservative discourse, which usually warns everyone about the catastrophes our culture will experience if we import these foreign values into the East.

In the past few months, two compelling stories made the news in Lebanon. What they had in common was the dreaded disease, AIDS/SIDA. The first story concerned a family in a Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon; the other took place on an Egyptian Air flight scheduled to depart Cairo. The first story related the sad tale of a young Palestinian man who had contracted AIDS. Of course, the man's family received the news with shock. Despite the Lebanese Ministry of Health's insurance program, and kind offers to treat the young man in his home, so that he could stay in his family's bosom during this trying period, the family's rejection of their son was complete and brutal. The tragedy is that the rejection was not only based on fear arising from misinformation about the manner in which AIDS can be spread; it was much more thoroughly rooted in unreserved shame, the most shameful kind of shame that our culture can produce.

The second story concerned an Ethiopian worker in Egypt who was diagnosed with AIDS and thus sent back to her own country. Having been the employee of a well-known Egyptian artist, her story circulated in all the magazines. Once aboard the plane, some people recognized her as the infamous AIDS sufferer. The all-too-concerned passengers on the Egypt Air flight to Ethiopia made such a fuss that the pilot was prevented from taking off until the Ethiopian woman had been removed from the plane. Not only did the Ethiopian worker have to suffer the double shock of the diagnosis and expatriation, she also had to undergo the more direct insult of her fellow passengers' behavior, which was not only symptomatic of the pervasive atmosphere of misinformation surrounding AIDS, but also illustrated the furious condemnation and punishment of all those who dare to contract the disease.

The ways that we have responded to AIDS in public and private in the East are, by any moral standards, outrageous. Of course, there are some notable exceptions, but they are rare indeed. The official policy of a large group of Arab countries has been to deny the "local" existence of AIDS, upholding the myth that the disease can only be imported. Some countries even require an HIV test for those seeking visas. The popular response, as witnessed in the examples above, has sunk into severe denial, and when confronted with the harsh reality, government officials and popular opinion have inhumanely rejected it.

This attitude has been quite visible in recent weeks

to all Lebanese TV viewers through the short documentary in the series on LBC/C33 entitled *Lubnaaniyaat* ("Lebanese Women"), which was commissioned by the Lebanese National Preparatory Committee for the Fourth World Conference on Women. In this piece, Badriyya, a young Lebanese woman who contracted AIDS from her husband, relates to whomever cares to hear her absolute loneliness and isolation, and the solitary and painful path she will have to travel until the end.

Badriyya, of course, is not the only one. Recently the Lebanese Ministry of Health (which alone deserves praise for its active campaign for AIDS awareness and compassion for AIDS victims), issued a frank public warning to Lebanese women, informing them in no uncertain terms that they are at increased risk of contracting AIDS, not through any fault of their own, but through the irresponsible and immature behavior of their philandering husbands. This new form of patriarchal victimization goes unnoticed, as usual. Our eastern society has little to say to these men (whose sexual exploits are even admired and encouraged in some sectors of our society), unless, of course, the men themselves contract AIDS. Then, the condemnation and punishment are absolute.

The ways that individuals, communities, governments and religious leaders throughout the Arab world are dealing with the AIDS crisis leave a lot to be desired. The violent rejection of AIDS victims which permeates all levels of our society does not correspond with the noble values of mercy and compassion of which we claim to be the trustees. To the contrary, AIDS, being associated with sexuality, automatically becomes a "western" disease, and thus, there is all the more reason to deny HIV sufferers any help or humane concern. The value system in which we operate seems to be highly selective: not only are women excluded as soon as suspicion brushes anyone's mind concerning her moral qualities, it is now becoming obvious that the circle of shame and exclusion keeps on enlarging itself. Perhaps it will not be a bad idea to turn to the West and borrow some ethics which operate on a large social scale, especially those ethics reflecting more humane ways in which the weak and the sick are treated. At the very least, let us in the East stop bragging!

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