

# COLUMBIA SPECTATOR ARCHIVE

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## Religion and AIDS

by JAMES M. O'NEILL

A certain, slow death.

That's the ominous threat that hovers over every AIDS diagnosis. And the spectre of AIDS has pushed to the forefront many of its victims' needs for answers to difficult spiritual questions.

Two religious leaders on the Columbia University campus have counseled several students with AIDS. But student religious groups have been slow to come to the support of those affected by AIDS, their relatives, and their lovers.

Columbia's Rev. Scott Matheney, a Presbyterian minister, and Rev. Paul Dinter, a Catholic priest, have been involved with student AIDS victims in what Matheney called "grief counseling."

"I've helped counsel some students who eventually died from AIDS," said Matheney.

He became involved in AIDS counseling, he said, because "it goes beyond compassion. Here is a group of people being ostracized, and it's our job to help get them through that."

Matheney thinks the AIDS crisis is a religious problem in part because issues like suffering and death are involved.

But since gays have seen the churches and synagogues as hostile, they have tended to "chuck religious institutions," he said.

Yet many gays are still deeply, if privately, religious, he added. "A lot of these people are angered and have removed themselves from institutional religion." As a result, gays haven't gone to the campus religious groups for help.

Dr. Robert Gunn, a minister and psychotherapist at Union Theological Seminary, agreed. "It's almost a reverse prejudice. Gays grew up being taught by churches, teachers and parents that it's wrong to be gay."

Campus religious leaders hope to sponsor a visit later this year by Dr. John Boswell, a Yale professor, who would speak on how Christianity has dealt with homosexuality throughout history.

"Unfortunately," said Matheney, "it hasn't been a very good track record. Only in the last 40 years has the Chri



good track record. Only in the last 40 years has the Christian community begun to open up to gays."

In addition to the lecture, Matheney said he hopes to start a support group within the next two months for people with AIDS and their friends.

The nearest off-campus religious community, the interdenominational Riverside Church, has organized a support group which is to meet tonight and every Thursday night at 8 p.m. for the next six weeks. Dr. Gunn will lead the sessions.

The Men's Class, a conservative Riverside church group, has also held an AIDS-related panel discussion, entitled "Confronting the AIDS crisis from a biblical perspective." Rev. Blahoslav Hruby, a Presbyterian minister in charge of the session, said last Sunday's panel consisted of three members of the born-again Evangelical community who stressed that "homosexuality isn't normal and can be overcome."

"The newsmedia overlooks this aspect of AIDS—that homosexuals should be told they can overcome their problems," said Hruby.

Other off-campus religious organizations and communities in New York offer consolation and companionship, if not specific answers, for those suffering from AIDS and facing the threat of death.

Matheney said that Lee Hancock, an associate minister at the Judson Memorial Church in Manhattan, is in charge of a religious coalition on AIDS. Other communities, including the Metropolitan Community Church, Trinity Metropolitan Community Church, and the Circle of More Light hold religious services for gays and lesbians.

Dignity, the Catholic gay and lesbian group, and Axios, the community for Eastern Orthodox Christian gay men and women, also sponsor religious liturgy.