

THE ORDERS OF THE CHURCH OF AIDS

In the spirit of Erwin Chargaff and Umberto Eco.

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Similarities between the Church of HIV-AIDS (CHA) and the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) are obvious. Recognized limitations of analogical thinking notwithstanding, our understanding of the current *statu quo* of applied wisdom might be improved by indulging in some jocular pursuit of these facile analogies; the exercise may provide a framework for a better understanding of how some subsets of orthodox "scientists" of the CHA react to critical analysis.

We may, to begin, broadly classify the orthodox "scientists" into three types: Jesuits, Dominicans and Franciscans. We will examine each with the understanding that there are numerous shades and "in betweens", and some unusual exceptions to the generalities and generalizations put forth. These musings do not intend to constitute an exhaustive taxonomy of the Faithful.

The Jesuit Order is relatively young. It was born in the XVI century, a time when the RCC was under imminent threat of fragmentation (as it did fragment). St. Ignacio de Loyola, its founder, was responsible for providing the RCC with brain power to counter the infinitely attractive arguments – as well as the much higher moral ground – of the reformers. This brain power should operate subtly and profoundly but, very importantly, should never question the authority of the Pope and the necessity of only one truth for Salvation. As anyone trained in analytical thinking knows, this is a difficult task; one never knows where the pursuit of ideas will lead. The intellectual prowess of the Company of Jesus and their relentless drive to educate the princes during the Counter Reformation, made the Order the standard-bearer for the educational concerns of the RCC. It has been said that the Jesuits have given both the best and the worst of the legacy of the RCC to the world. Their legacy includes translation/preservation of many jewels of oral wisdom in conquered/annihilated peoples during the European expansion into the world, educational institutions that for a long time were of enviable quality, the Missions of the New World, and even important parts of that broad movement which has been called Theology of Liberation.

The true Jesuit of the CHA is educated. He/she can think rigorously and point out fallacies and inconsistencies in the heretic's argument. He/she has accomplished "something" regarded of value in the lab. He/she "knows his/her stuff". He/she can handle the paradoxes of HIV "variability" and invisibility, can defend the notion of "quasi-species", will remember the error rate of reverse transcriptase and will admit that failure to isolate is indeed a serious problem. He/she will craft the cleverest smoke-screens and dialectical obstacles. However, he/she will not question the fact that all this, added together, may actually mean that the dogma is *wrong*. Jesuits of CHA are not abundant. Maybe, in the beginning, David Baltimore was a Jesuit; Howard Temin certainly was. Current exponents of this subtler yet bounded mode of thought subscribe the idea that simplistic statements of the sort "HIV kills like a truck" (St. Gallo dixit) or "direct cytotoxic effects" are false. But,

as a true Jesuit, will continue to believe that HIV is doing "something important, even essential" anyway, and will proceed to spend as much (mostly tax-payer) money as they can studying all possible combinations of differentiation markers in the cells apparently injured, directly or otherwise, by "HIV disease progression". The Jesuit will not give up on dogma until ordered to do so from higher up, which would probably mean an irreversible upheaval of the CHA. As with the RCC with the various crowns of Europe, the CHA is bound to other power systems (such as the pharmaceutical industry and the HMOs) so tightly that it is very likely that the toppling of one will mean the demise of the others (at least in the present form). The Jesuit is faithful to a well established discipline of unified thought.

Dominicans of CHA are, however, a completely different kettle of piranhas. The Dominican Order of the RCC is much older than the Jesuits, and was founded when the Cathar heresy was widespread. It was chartered in the XIII century and St. Domingo de Guzmán, its founder, was a man of vision. His Order (also called the Order of the Preaching Brothers) was born to ensure that the RCC would have what is needed (and more) in this temporal realm to be able to carry out the spiritual guidance that a lost and sinful humanity needed. Dominicans knew that to be able to lead spiritually, the RCC needed earthly wealth; the superb monasteries they built are a testimony to how it was possible to extract everything that was needed from the impoverished flock they were shepherds to. Dominicans were, in some ways, the cause of the schism the Jesuits would combat three centuries later; they levied heavy taxes, and constituted themselves into, possibly, the most economically powerful force of the late middle ages. However, in their eagerness to secure enough economic power to be able to lead everyone to Paradise, they overstepped their bounds; they became too blatantly wealthy and even, to the horror of many faithful, began the issue that would become "the last drop": the sale of indulgences. Since the power of purification of a sacrament is directly emanated from the Divine Grace –no matter how lewd, obese and corrupt the priest who dispensed it– they sold this power in advance to those who could afford it. This proved to be too much, and Luther (in what he thunderously denounced as the *usury of salvation*) and others seized on this particularly debasing practice to carve up the following of the RCC. The rest is, as they say, history. The Dominicans were, needless to say, the most important force behind the Holy Inquisition and the most emblematic of all was the Grand Inquisitor Tomás de Torquemada, terror of the heretics, and a figure that looms threateningly to this very day.

The *vrai* Dominican of CHA is not necessarily well educated, although he/she may boast impeccable credentials from the best theological seminars. In fact, he/she is not unusually gifted for erudite debate. He/she does know his/her theology, but superficially and has a limited knack for dialectical thinking. They customarily prefer reading and writing reviews rather than doing the refined science that the massive budgets of their labs would allow. They would rather do the circuit of congresses and meetings than pursue "the mysteries of the virus". They will exert an iron-fisted control on those committees that decide who and what ideas will be funded and, of course, they will patent and sell anything they can. The Dominicans of CHA will burn at the stake –academically speaking– anyone they consider to be a threat to the power the CHA wields, be it spiritual (which can be challenged by heretical teachings) or temporal (which can be threatened by curing the ill without their patented liturgy). Examples of the early – but still active - Dominicans of CHA are

numerous: Fauci, Gallo, Blattner, *et cetera*; of more recent inception are Brother Wainberg, Friar Ho and, of course, the Small Inquisitor John P. Moore of Cornell Abbey. They do not need to elaborate arguments, they do not need to listen; they hand out salvation or torment because *they* know the truth, and they will be richly rewarded in power, money, or both. The Dominican is faithful to a well established power system.

This brings us to the Franciscans. In many ways, the Order of the followers of St. Francesco of Assisi are the most paradoxical members of the RCC. Their origins in the XIII century –almost simultaneously with the Dominicans– were so much at conflict with the temporal power of the RCC that they were often chastised. Their claim that the vow of poverty was more important than anything else inevitably made them clash with the more pragmatic Dominicans, who burned many of them as heretics for their desire to emulate the life of the Savior. The dispute was, largely, a conflict between the vows of poverty espoused by St. Francis and the vow of obedience, *sine qua non* for functionality within the RCC. Eventually, their obedience secured, they became a stable part of the RCC. Although they had a limited participation in the Inquisition, they produced mostly priests that would be “with the people”. In fact, Franciscans of the early days were often accused of sympathizing with, and even actively participating in, various radical/revolutionary movements which aimed at “curing” the RCC of its corruption, the most famous of which were probably the *fraticelli*, mercilessly pursued and exterminated by the early Inquisition.

The Franciscan of CHA is not rich. He/she may or may not be gifted for theological argument. He/she will, however, be of the people and will never patent anything. They will duly teach in small universities all that received wisdom they are told is the means to Salvation. If they are physicians, they will follow the “treatment guidelines” to the tee, and they will try to save as many as they can. They will rarely question, but they will dedicate their professional lives to what they consider is the well-being of others. We have all seen them, the Franciscans of CHA, walking the most miserable slums of Nairobi or Kinshasa, avoiding the open sewers, piles of garbage and the swarms of flies, bitterly denouncing sexual promiscuity. They are members of the Church after all, and their faith will almost always prevail over the data they may see around them. They will also sarcastically denounce the avarice of the Dominicans and their associates, that will not make life-saving antiretrovirals cheaply available to those poor and wretched sinners doomed to perdition, and the indifference of the well-funded Jesuits. They hand out antiretroviral death as Franciscan missionaries handed out original sin, shame and guilt; but they will not get rich for it, and will be often punished for their allegiance to the suffering. They are Franciscans after all, and they cannot be immune to suffering (as are Dominicans) or removed from it (as are most of the very few Jesuits); thus, occasionally, they will relinquish their vows of obedience to their need to aid the ailing, and will be punished for it. They are physicians who do not have international salaries, they are not heads of laboratories or medical units, and they often live with those they are trying to aid and console.

It is the Franciscans of the Church of HIV-AIDS that represent the majority of the still faithful, and who are not beyond actual salvation. Someone once said that “it is easier and more valuable to teach a brave man to think right than to teach courage to a clear-thinking coward”.