

# In memory of the victims of Christian fundamentalism

by Jens Galschiot

*A copper sculpture titled, "In the Name of God," was inaugurated on 1 December 2006, International AIDS Day, in front of the cathedral of Copenhagen. The sculpture depicts a pregnant teenage girl crucified on a high cross. The sculpture is an outcry, an artist's comment on the crusade against contraception and denial of sexual rights launched by Christian fundamentalists, with President Bush and the Roman Catholic Pope in the lead. The exhibit, carried out in cooperation with Dean Anders Gadegaard and the parish council, quickly sparked a lively debate in the press and the Internet (see <http://www.aidoh.dk/debate>).*

The life-sized Copenhagen sculpture is the first in a series of similar sculptures to be displayed worldwide. Although it is not meant as a contribution to the abortion debate, its aim is to advocate for the right to contraception and to truthful and unprejudiced sexual education. The sponsors of the event believe that the promotion of such rights is shared by wide circles of people, independent of their stance on abortion.

## The concept behind the work of art

Other versions of the crucified pregnant girl will be cast in copper. Some versions are naked. Others have clothes covering

intimate parts of the body, to avoid a futile dispute about nudity that in some countries might derail the debate. The sculpture can be displayed in different ways. It can be mounted on a cross or made to stand on tiptoe on a plinth. The height of the cross can vary, from 2.5 to 5 metres, according to the space at the exhibit site.

A big colour photo of the crucified teenager on the front page, with the title of the sculpture and the subtitle, "In memory of the victims of fundamentalism," has been made into a poster. On the rear side of the poster are printed basic facts about the consequences of fundamentalist

interference in projects carried out by contraception clinics.

The sculpture and the poster will be useful in various ways:

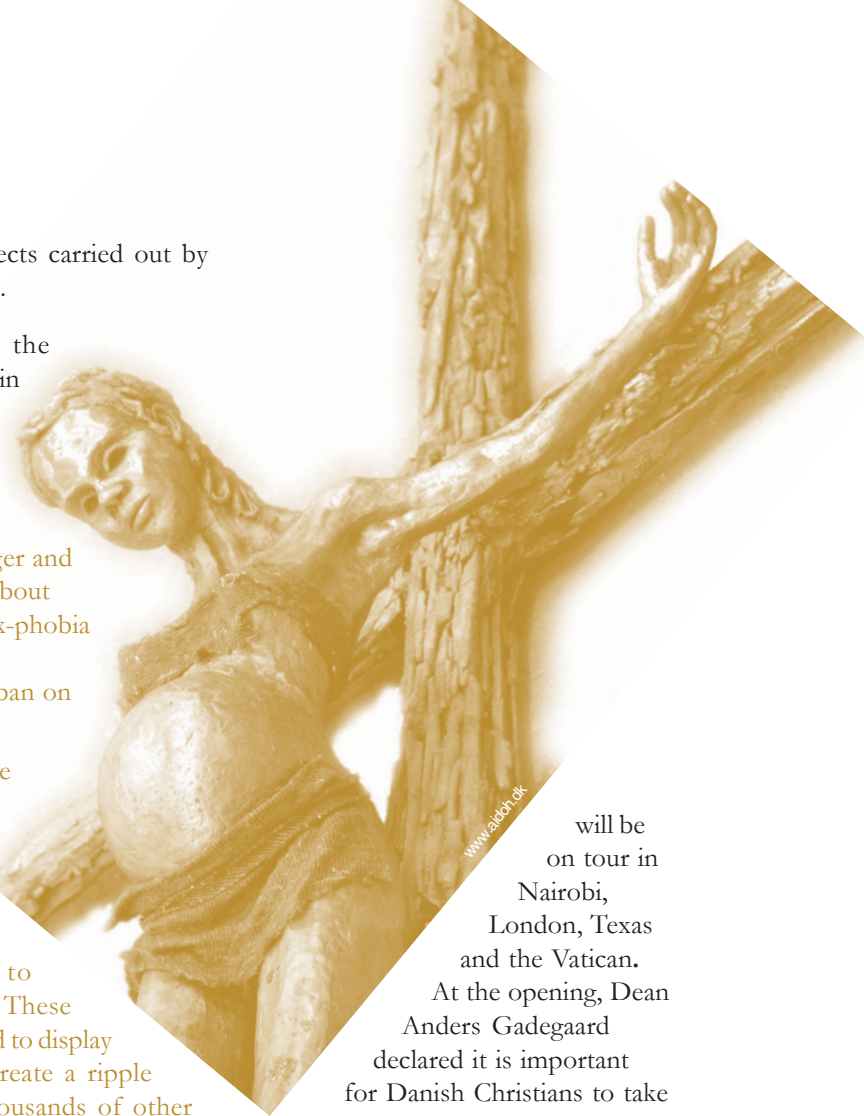
- The display of the sculpture in its different versions will trigger and fuel discussions about contraception, sex-phobia and Christian fundamentalists' ban on condoms.
- The poster will be issued in big numbers (70,000 copies) and distributed the world over to relevant NGOs. These will be encouraged to display the poster and create a ripple effect so that thousands of other small art exhibitions will spur more discussions. The press will also be invited to publish the poster.
- Forty thousand flyers will be printed with the same motif as the A3-size poster, with a thorough explanation of the project and links to sculptural sites.

Events can be followed at: <<http://www.aidoh.dk/InTheNameOfGod>>

A comprehensive documentation and a wide range of linkages on the HIV/AIDS situation can be found at: <<http://www.aidoh.dk/GlobalGag>>

### Sites of exhibition

In Denmark, the art installation in front of the Cathedral of Copenhagen



[www.aidoh.dk](http://www.aidoh.dk)

will be on tour in Nairobi, London, Texas and the Vatican.

At the opening, Dean Anders Gadegaard declared it is important for Danish Christians to take some responsibility on the issue and express an opinion about what “their” God is being used for globally.

In Nairobi, Kenya, the sculpture was displayed at the World Social Forum (WSF) 20-25 January 2007, where 100,000 people came. It is appropriate that the WSF took place in the heart of Africa, exactly where the contraception discussions had been most intense. The event also projected the sculpture globally.

A big women’s association that has its roots in Africa had considered exhibiting the sculpture in London on 8 March, International Women’s Day.

In Italy, the sculpture will be displayed in St. Peter’s Square in

Rome and will later be exhibited at a gallery in central Rome.

In Texas, the sculpture will be launched in coordination with liberal Christian groups and various NGOs.

Other sites to be considered include Poland and the European Union (EU) Parliament.

### **Partners**

The project expects to cooperate with the following:

- Artists and art institutions who are interested in seeing art come out of the museums, rather than be constrained within them, and to challenge opinions on real-life issues in the public domain.
- Progressive Christians who are not interested in “their” God being taken prisoner by a right wing conservative interpretation of the Bible, with disastrous consequences.
- Organisations working worldwide with HIV/AIDS and contraception policies, as well as organisations defending women’s rights.

### **Symbolism**

The sculpture is a rich symbol that can generate multi-layered interpretations.

Here are just some possible meanings that can be attributed to the work of art:

- As a symbol of Christianity, the cross is immediately associated with the Christian faith. Because of a fundamentalist interpretation, a shift in contraception policy has been enforced in many places in the world. The consequences have been disastrous, especially in Africa.
- The cross is an ancient execution device, a brutal method for killing. In Africa, a diagnosis of HIV/AIDS is often synonymous with receiving a death sentence.
- Crucifixion was a public and protracted mode of execution, an agony that could last several days. Likewise, the death process of the HIV-contaminated is protracted and painful. The sexual offence is tabooed, hence, extramarital pregnancy often leads to social exclusion and stigmatisation (in the cross, this is represented by the piercing of Jesus’ hands and feet).
- The pregnant teenager symbolises innocence, with rich associations of Jesus as an innocent sacrificial lamb. The child who has been led astray because of ignorance, impulsiveness or maybe as a rape victim, is mercilessly exposed to the ultimate punishment, as Jesus was.
- The female body symbolises women as bearers of the brunt of suffering. Unlike the male body, they display the proof of the sexual act. Often, the woman has become HIV-contaminated through rape or through contact with a husband who has engaged and been HIV-infected in an extra-marital intercourse.

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Should the powerful language of art not be allowed to show the crucified Jesus taking the side of the present day's suffering and oppressed, then the narrative of the Gospel will at best be reduced to a barren ceremony void of connection to the world we live in. At worst, the Gospel will be instrumentalised to legitimise a policy causing suffering and death to millions. In fact, I think that this abuse of God and the Bible deserves the term "blasphemous."

This sculptural outcry is aimed at a religious interpretation that causes suffering and hardships to the world's most vulnerable people, not a criticism of Christianity as such. The artist appreciates cooperation with Christian groups that take Christian charity seriously, and accordingly, take the side of the suffering. Such an attitude is an expression of a Christian tradition that asserts a commitment to relieve suffering. A research into church history reveals a multitude of monasteries and hospitals, connected to the Catholic Church or other Churches, displaying readiness to help the sick and poor, when all others had failed.

### **Blasphemy?**

The cross is a very strong symbol, so I face the risk that the sculpture will provoke passionate reactions. Many people may be outraged and even see it as blasphemous.

But by no means is it intended to be blasphemous. When a parallel is drawn from Jesus' suffering on the cross to the suffering of women in our time, we envisage a modern interpretation of the compassionate Jesus. His suffering and death on the cross was an expression of endless compassion and solidarity with humanity. Jesus himself makes a connection between people's suffering and his own through the statement, "I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me." (Matthew 25:40). The quotation spurs us to take Jesus seriously in a modern context. This is exactly what the sculpture does as a living symbol, expressing compassion with those who are suffering.

### **Factual background**

Recently, the fundamentalists, with President Bush and the Roman Catholic Pope in the lead, have dominated the discussion about AIDS and contraception. The disastrous consequence has been the withdrawal of funds from contraception programs carried out by the UN and NGOs the world over.

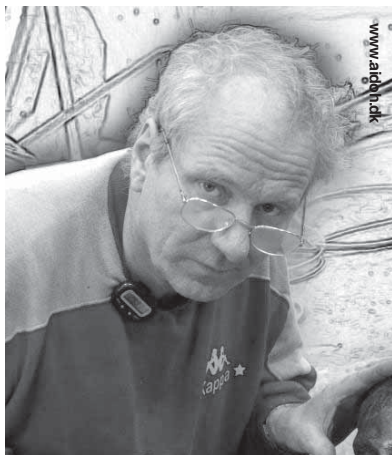
The fundamentalists assert that handing out condoms and giving information on

contraception is an invitation and instigation to promiscuity. They claim that people should be taught not to have sex before marriage, and when married, to use sex only for procreation.

This policy has created disasters where it has been introduced. For ten years, Uganda succeeded in reducing the spread of HIV contamination through massive campaigns to use condoms and to limit the number of sexual partners. Condoms were handed out for free. As a result, the rate of contamination has decreased from 15% of the population

in 1990 to 5% in 2001. But in 2002, Uganda changed its policy. Pressured by the US President, Uganda removed the condoms from the campaign, and sexual abstinence was extolled as the only means to fight HIV. The result has been the doubling of new contaminations each year from 70,000 in 2003 to 130,000 in 2005.

As a result of the implementation of the same policy, Texas is one of the states with the highest per capita number of HIV-contaminated in the USA and the highest number of teenage pregnancies. ■



*Jens Galschiot, born 1954 in Denmark. He stakes his art to defend the ethical values of our society, regardless of political, religious, or economic interests. His sculptures suddenly appear in public areas and signal the beginning of a performance. His best known works are My Inner Beast (European cities in 1993) and the Pillar of Shame (Hong Kong, Mexico and Brazil).*

*This article, originally found on <[www.aidoh.dk/new-struct/Happenings-and-Projects/2006/In-the-Name-of-God/GB-In-the-Name-of-God.htm](http://www.aidoh.dk/new-struct/Happenings-and-Projects/2006/In-the-Name-of-God/GB-In-the-Name-of-God.htm)>, is reprinted with permission from the author.*