

**Muslim LGBT Inclusion Project  
Final Report**

**presented by  
Intersections International**



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# Intersections Muslim LGBT Inclusion Project

## Final Report

### Forward

Intersections International<sup>1</sup>, a New York based not-for-profit organization based in New York City, received a grant from the Arcus Foundation<sup>2</sup> to do an assessment of the role of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) Muslims within the American Muslim community and the wider society. At Intersections, we had undertaken work in both the Muslim and LGBT communities. Although the work was widely regarded in both arenas, there was no “crossover” in these two communities. However, since our very name implies forming “intersections,” we were deemed uniquely suited to host a process that identified how, if and under what circumstances the voice of LGBT Muslims could be better understood and articulated.

The Muslim LGBT Inclusion Project sought to: initiate one-on-one conversations with Muslim theologians, religious practitioners, academics and lay people around LGBT issues; explore Qur’anic passages as they relate to homosexuality; consider cultural and historic practices and precedents related to LGBT individuals; uncover existing support and resistance to LGBT inclusion and equality; and lay the foundation for an evidence-based strategy for future action in continuing this conversation.

To accomplish these objectives, we commissioned three articles by respected scholars in the fields of Islamic studies: Dr. Hussein Rashid, Dr. Aisha Geissinger and Mr. Munir Shaikh. These articles appear at the conclusion of this report. We also held two dozen one-on-one conversations with Muslim thought leaders in academia, among clergy, in the communications arena, and with youth. These conversations were held with such renowned thinkers as Imam Daayiee Abdullah, Ayaz Ahmed, Imam Bashar Arafat, Mohammed Abu-Nimer, Mona Eltahawy, John Esposito, Samar Habib, El-Farouk Khaki, Shabbir Mansuri, and Laury Silvers.

We also hosted six intimate conversations in “safe spaces” around the country where individuals from across the spectrum of perspectives on this topic gathered to express those views, share stories and explore concrete suggestions as to how the conversation could continue and expand. Finally, we conducted a survey taken by those present during the gatherings, those

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<sup>1</sup> Founded in 2007, Intersections International is a multi-faith, multi-cultural initiative of the Collegiate Church of New York, the oldest corporation in North America, dating back to 1628. Intersections’ overarching mandate is to bring people together who differ, to honor the differences and to forge common ground for justice, reconciliation and peace. The issues we address are varied, but the process used is fairly consistent — to gather disparate, and often surprising, voices around a common table to explore new paradigms for problem solving that transcend disciplines and shatter stereotypes. Intersections seeks to engage others in a journey that moves from fear to empathy, from ignorance to understanding, and from apathy to action. Work is concentrated in three primary areas: amplifying marginalized voices (immigrant Muslims in NYC, persons living with HIV/AIDS, Native Americans, LGBT persons); multi-faith dialogue and action (most significantly in healing the rift between the Muslim and non-Muslim worlds); and addressing the consequences of conflict, focusing on two communities — Iraqi refugees and returning U.S. vets — and on the intersection between power and values. We frequently use the arts as a way to engage both hearts and minds. For more information, go to [www.intersections.org](http://www.intersections.org).

<sup>2</sup> For more information on Arcus Foundation, go to [www.arcusfoundation.org](http://www.arcusfoundation.org).

invited to the gatherings but who were unable to attend, and those with whom we held the one-on-one conversations.

This report is a narrative summary of these findings. It does not pretend to be a scientific study, but its anecdotal evidence is not insignificant. We invite the reader along on a journey, where the often difficult subject of homosexuality is discussed openly to see how queer Muslims may find their voice within the *ummah* (Arabic for the Muslim community) and in the wider American civic arena, and what might be done to nurture and support an ongoing dialogue.

There are many people to acknowledge, whose passion and professionalism made this project so successful. First and foremost among them are my colleagues Sara Reef, Intersections' Director of Cross Cultural Initiatives, and Sung Park, our Director of Community Engagement and Advancement. They helped direct the project throughout its duration, both conceptually and logistically, and served as co-facilitators in the gatherings. Evangeline Villena and Barb Powell provided invaluable attention to detail in bringing the report to its final conclusion. Lucretia Holden and James Rowe provided essential administrative support behind the scenes.

Melody Fox Ahmed, Zabrina Santiago, Munir Shaikh, Shabbir Mansuri and David Ponsart helped organize our six gatherings. I also would like to acknowledge Samar Habib, Laury Silvers and Imam Daayiee Abdullah who offered support and wise counsel in the project's early days. Finally, I wish to personally thank all those who took the risk to be part of our conversations. Their willingness, in many cases to trust "us stranger," to participate in a dialogue that almost everyone agreed was an important but difficult conversation to have, their sensitivity, compassion and thoughtful exchanges were an inspirational thing to behold.

The Rev. Robert Chase  
Founding Director  
Intersections International

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## Executive Summary

At a moment in history that has seen dramatic challenges to the status quo in the Muslim world, Intersections International initiated the Muslim LGBT Inclusion Project to identify how, if and under what circumstances the voice of queer Muslims could be better understood and articulated in the wider Muslim community and in society-at-large.

The methodology in the report included two dozen one-on-one conversations with Muslim theologians, religious practitioners, academics and lay people around LGBT issues; the commissioning of three articles by respected scholars in the fields of Islamic studies; hosting six intimate conversations in “safe spaces” around the country where individuals of widely diverse views on this topic could gather to express those views; and conducting a survey to quantify opinions on this matter.

During these conversations, an initial point of discussion was the impact mosques have on individuals and whether the mosque should be a locus for work on this issue. In five of the six settings, majorities indicated that the mosque had little direct impact on their lives. There was considerable discussion about how the mosque structure worked against openness and was counter-productive to a transparent conversation. One participant used the phrase, “the tyranny of the mosque.” While some disagreed, consensus was that the mosque is not the most advantageous setting for this conversation.

On the other hand, there was much dialogue about the significant role played by the internet and social networking in forming Muslim communities, especially among the young. As we expanded the question beyond the mosque to the broader issue of religion itself in securing acceptance and support for queer Muslims, opinions often were split. The prevailing view among many was that the “entry point” for the discussion should be human or civil rights and not religion. Opening the conversation with religious arguments made the subject a non-starter for many in our group.

Still, there was the underlying thread that, eventually, religious language and imagery would need to enter the discourse. To do so, there would need to be a re-framing of traditional interpretations of homosexuality in the Qur’an. The call from many in our groups was that the emphasis should be on Allah the merciful, and the basis for behavior towards gay and lesbian Muslims (and LGBT folks of other faiths) should be rooted in compassion instead of judgment, as the Prophet was compassionate.

On several occasions, the struggle for LGBT equality among Muslims (at least in the United States) was likened to the struggle within Christianity, both during the Reformation and in the liberation movements of a generation ago. Many of the “religious arguments” (both pro and con) that surfaced in our discussions were resonant with questions about the authority and interpretation of scripture that queer Christians have fought for decades and continue to fight today. The linkage of gender equality to LGBT justice and inclusion was also clearly and frequently made.

History and culture play important roles in this controversy and both our conversations and the commissioned articles stressed this aspect of the discourse. There was frequent acknowledgement that in pre-modern Muslim societies' attitudes towards gender minorities and same-sex desires and acts, it is impossible to speak about a single Muslim cultural or religious "position" on these issues. Several personal stories were shared that demonstrated the strength of this cultural pull. Scholars and participants in our conversations agreed that there is a vastly different worldview about homosexuality in Muslim majority countries and in the West: the difference between "practice" and "identity." Homosexuality as an "identity" often was seen as a Western construct imposed on Islam.

Cultural consideration, of course, moved from intriguing academic exercises to the front page and exploded in complexity for American Muslims on September 11, 2001. The terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon and the subsequent "war on terror" created an additional layer of navigation for women and queer Muslims in the United States. Islamophobia and homophobia became intertwined realities, and many voiced the opinion that intolerance against Muslims was the greater danger and so that should be addressed first. Others saw these converging identities as presenting an opportunity to heal both.

In conclusion, this is a critical conversation in a transformational time. We recommend a two-tracked follow-up that equips groups of queer Muslims to service their members more effectively and that sensitizes the wider Muslim community to the needs of this particular constituency within its ranks. This strategy should include both an international and a media component. As queer Muslim leaders emerge into positions of strength and support from among their peers, and as the wider community is better equipped to receive their leadership, counsel and participation, the Muslim community and the whole world will be enriched.

### **The Moment**

We began our Muslim LGBT Inclusion Project in May 2010. In one of the very first one-on-one conversations, we were told that unprecedented restlessness within the Muslim community lay just beneath the surface. Like an uneasy earth in the throes of tectonic shifts, this foment had been intensified, we were told, both by pressures "pushing down" on Islam and by new dynamics that were "bubbling up."

**The push down:** Neither new nor exclusive to Islam, conservative social forces seeking to retain power were relentlessly on the attack. Innovative thinking, communicating and challenges to the established order were declared lacking in seriousness, scholarly discipline or respect for tradition. These attacks intensified in light of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, and the ensuing "global war on terror," with the critique that adherents to such thinking were contaminated by Western ideas and therefore inauthentically Muslim.

**The bubble up:** Since 9/11, there has been a deeper level of attention on the global stage paid to all things Islam, especially in Western societies. This spotlight prompts Muslim and non-Muslim alike to ask probing questions about what it means to be Muslim in our globalized society. Empirical evidence to support this can be found in Max Kramer’s article in the two-volume work, *Islam and Homosexuality*, where the writer points out that the number of students learning Arabic in U.S. universities increased by 92.3 percent between 1998 and 2002.<sup>1</sup>

The pervasive presence of the internet and its opportunities for social networking mean that explorations of one’s self, one’s faith, one’s culture and one’s relationships with others need no longer exist in a vacuum or in geographically isolated places. New paradigms that question authority can now ripple across continents in ways that challenge traditional ways of thinking and interacting. “A revolution is coming,” we were told, “and one of the defining issues will be where one stands on gender equality and LGBT rights.” Munir Shaikh, in an article commissioned for this report, quotes Professor Kecia Ali in saying, “those who have appointed themselves the guardians of communal orthodoxy are particularly vigilant on matters concerning women and gender — in part because it is in these realms that the construction of Muslim identity in self-conscious opposition to a decadent West takes place.”<sup>2</sup>

And then, on December 17, Tunisian Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire.<sup>3</sup> While the reasons behind his action lie far outside the scope of our work here, the prophetic utterances we first heard in May seemed to have come true much more quickly, and more dramatically, than anyone could have predicted. The interrelatedness of our modern world, and the crumbling of old structures, had become front page news. How would the world change? The jury is, as they say, still out. But one thing is for sure: an assessment of how LGBT Muslims “fit” within the wider *ummah* and in society-at-large is both timely and fluid. It is within this unfolding context that we were privileged to do this work.

## **The Methodology**

Central to our process was the hosting of six “discreet conversations” in cities across the country where there are large Muslim populations with community leaders who hold a variety of perspectives on the issue of Muslim LGBT inclusion. These gatherings took place in six locations: New York (2); Washington, D.C.; Los Angeles; Chicago and Dearborn, Mich. The groups ranged in size from six to 12. More than 50 people took part. They were artists and

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<sup>1</sup> Max Kramer, “Sexual Orientation: The Ideological Underpinnings of Gay Advance in Muslim-Majority Societies as Witnessed in On-Line Chat Rooms”; *Islam and Homosexuality*, Volume 1; 2010; footnote 13.

<sup>2</sup> Munir Shaikh, “Contemporary Developments with Muslim Societies and Communities regarding LGBT Identity and Rights; Intersections Muslim LGBT Inclusion Project; May, 2011; p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> For one account of how Bouazizi’s suicide set off events in Tunisia, Egypt and other Muslim majority countries, see <http://englishaljazeera.net/indepth/features/2011/01/201111684242518839.html>.

architects, students and professors, imams and activists, homemakers and philanthropists. They ranged in age from 19-68 and, while most (51 percent) were born in the United States, natives of 13 other countries were present, indicating the rich diversity within the Muslim community, both in the United States and across the globe. Slightly more than 50 percent were Sunni.<sup>4</sup> Since we were seeking “community leaders,” it is not surprising that all were high school graduates and more than half held post-graduate degrees. Only 4 percent considered themselves conservative while almost 29 percent considered themselves very liberal.<sup>5</sup>

There were no pre-conditions for participation other than that those who attended agreed to participate thoughtfully. No one’s position on the issue was asked in advance of the gatherings and no one’s sexual practice or orientation was asked before or during the discussions. Those who identified their sexual orientation during the conversations did so voluntarily.

While there were a variety of perspectives in the room in each of the gatherings, one myth that quickly was dispelled was that there are *no* LGBT persons among the 5 million plus Muslims in the United States. As one participant in our Chicago group said, “By denying our LGBT community, we suffer a collective loss.” However, throughout the course of the six gatherings, even though 13 participants self-identified as LGBT, in the confidential survey taken by all the participants, only 11 indicated “self” when asked if they knew someone who was LGBT. Another eight left the question blank altogether. Such caution is indicative of the ongoing sensitivities to this issue, even among highly educated, liberal leaning Muslims.

In one of the articles commissioned for this report, Munir Shaikh offers a more nuanced response in his opening paragraphs as he addresses the remarks — seemingly absurd on the face of them to most Americans — of Iran’s President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, speaking at a forum for world leaders at Columbia University in 2007.<sup>6</sup> Shaikh quotes a question posed by Professor John Boswell: “Do categories exist because humans recognize real distinctions in the world around them, or are categories arbitrary conventions, simply names for things that have categorical force because humans agree to use them in certain ways?” Shaikh answers, “For Ahmadinejad, “homosexual” is not a preexisting category, but something (Western) culture has constructed.<sup>7</sup> Definitions are not monolithic and carry heavy cultural baggage as we came to see throughout our conversations.

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<sup>4</sup> Also represented were Shi’a, Sufi, secular, “Muslim” with no designation, and one who was “Sunni with Sufi inflection.”

<sup>5</sup> These percentages vary from the results of the full survey, which included persons who were invited to the gatherings but were unable to attend and those with whom we had one-on-one conversations. For a complete report of the survey, see appendix 1. This was never meant to be a scientific sampling of the broader Muslim community. Invitations (see appendix 2) were extended to trusted colleagues and to their trusted networks; while this sampling clearly skews toward more highly educated and more liberal Muslims, this demographic is often ignored in the media and dismissed as uninvolved by the pundits. In keeping with the saying often attributed to Woody Allen that “showing up is half the battle,” their very participation in this exercise can be seen as an initial volley in shattering stereotypes.

<sup>6</sup> Shaikh, p.1.

<sup>7</sup> Shaikh, p.1.

While all participants were Muslim, the facilitated dialogues did not begin with religious issues, but started with an exercise about identity, inviting participants to get in touch with those aspects of their lives with which they most closely identify — gender, nationality, vocation, relationship, race, religion, etc. Coincidentally, this is where Dr. Hussein Rashid also began in one of the articles commissioned for this project:

For definitional purposes, we consider an identity to be composed of multiple identifications. As an example, a person can be both male and a stamp collector. Some of these identifications are relatively unchanging (male), whereas others are more dynamic and voluntary (stamp collector). Identity is constructed out of the relationship among various identifications, and how an individual chooses to affiliate with various identifications.<sup>8</sup>

### **The Mosque or Not the Mosque**

Early in the process, we also engaged in a most revealing exercise — called a locogram<sup>9</sup> — where individuals are asked to leave their seats and, in an open space, place themselves in relationship to a concept that indicates the level of impact the concept has had in their lives. In this case, participants were first asked to stand in a place that symbolizes their relationship to their local mosque or community center. Next, everyone was asked to do the same thing vis-à-vis the LGBT community.

The results of this were as interesting to watch as they were revealing. In a not-so-surprising development that was repeated in five of the six settings (Chicago being the exception), majorities (in some cases, significant majorities) positioned themselves at a distance from the center point — some in the farthest corners of the room — thereby indicating that the mosque has little direct impact on their lives. In discussion that followed, several contended that this exercise mirrored surveys that show that the vast majority of Muslims do not belong to a local mosque (numbers stated by participants varied between 70 percent and 80 percent).<sup>10</sup>

In Los Angeles, one participant said that because of the way prayer space is divided in mosques, people are “set up,” with males and females segregated. This prompted another participant to ask the rhetorical question, “Where do transgender Muslims pray?” While the question was asked supportively, this becomes a profoundly difficult personal issue for

<sup>8</sup> Hussein Rashid; “The Name Game”; Muslim LGBT Inclusion Project; *Intersections*; May 2, 2011; p.1.

<sup>9</sup> Rory Remer and Pam Remer; “Enhancing Multi-Cultural Interactions Using Psychodramatic Interventions”; University of Kentucky; page 5.

<sup>10</sup> A comprehensive study by the Pew Research Center in 2007 found that approximately 1/3 of American Muslims attend a mosque “seldom or never.” See [www.pewresearch.org/assets/pdf/muslim-americans.pdf](http://www.pewresearch.org/assets/pdf/muslim-americans.pdf). However, among our participants, an even lower percentage, 17.5 percent, responded to the question in the same way, the number who stated in the discussion following the locogram exercise that the mosque had little impact in their lives was much, much higher.

transgender individuals. Here again, the question was one of many that reflected a modern Western bias. Munir Shaikh offers insight on this issue from an historical perspective:

Early on, Muslim societies accommodated various gendered realities and sexual practices. There are *hadiths* indicating the existence of *mukhannaths* (who would be called transgender women in today's parlance) in the Prophet Muhammad's community ... If such individuals exhibited intrinsic female characteristics, then they were free to fraternize with women. Islamic legal scholars developed a body of opinions on the rights of intersex individuals with respect to marriage and sexual relations, as well as the appropriate placement in congregational prayer (intermediate between the rows of men and women).<sup>11</sup>

The question of whether and how to include the mosque in the LGBT equality equation surfaced again and again. One revealing one-on-one conversation<sup>12</sup> about mosque leadership indicated that imams generally do not hold true power in the way mosques are structured in the United States; this power belongs to the mosque administrators or organizers — lay people who provide financial support and for whom the mosque serves as a social networking vehicle that may or may not be in touch with Muslims in the community. An example cited in this conversation was in Biloxi, Miss., where a group of Pakistani doctors formed a mosque and secured the services of a Pakistani imam. However, the majority of the Muslim community in the Biloxi area consists of African Americans, many of whom are descendents of former slaves. The social and spiritual needs of the doctors had little relevance to the needs of the African-American community. Muslims are certainly not the only religious group to experience such disconnects, but in such settings, the effectiveness of addressing community concerns through the mosque structure can be questioned.

Many of our participants expressed doubt that the mosque structure could be used as an instrument for change, and one New York participant even used the phrase “the tyranny of the mosque,” especially where immigrant imams do not have the cultural context of what it means to be Muslim in the United States. As the Biloxi illustration was relayed to the group in Washington, D.C., however, one older participant offered that the current conversation about intentional inclusion of queer Muslims in the life of the mosque afforded an opportunity “not only to redistribute power, but to re-imagine what power is.”

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<sup>11</sup> Shaikh, p.2.

<sup>12</sup> Intersections staff members held about two dozen one-on-one conversations with community leaders, journalists, academics and imams about this topic. Highlights from these conversations are indicated throughout the report. They are presented without attribution (as is true of the comments made by participants in the conversation), because of confidentiality concerns.

Still, the prevailing view was that mosques were not the place to begin this conversation. Said one D.C. participant, “Mosques don’t open themselves to conversations about LGBT issues.” Said another, “The mosque is not conducive to the American Muslim community at this point. Youth are developing this discourse outside the mosque.” It is interesting to note that neither of these comments was from younger participants. One participant called issues of gender and sexuality “Islam’s Berlin Wall.”

The disconnect between Muslim faith and mosque life was especially true for younger Muslims. One self-identified gay man in his 20s in our Dearborn group indicated that he does not go to the mosque out of fear of rejection and even fear for his safety. Said one participant wistfully, “Can you imagine a spiritual space where you can be yourself?” When asked where young Muslims go to find community, the most common response was “on the internet” followed by “student groups.” The oft-repeated mentioning of social networking as central to youthful social structures confirms the outsized role that internet interaction has in shaping community for young Muslims.

The impact of the LGBT community on one’s life had a much more mixed reaction in our locogram exercise, and subsequent conversation indicated why. The queer Muslim community, despite recent gains in becoming more visible, is still a fragile and fractured entity within the wider world of American Muslims (and globally as well). Hence, interaction with and among organized groups of queer Muslims is limited. For most of our participants, knowledge of Islam’s theological and historic treatment of homosexuality, cultural differences and contemporary thinking on LGBT issues was obtained through the internet or from academic studies, and not from first hand experience with organized LGBT (or even LGBT-friendly) groups.<sup>13</sup>

### **Theology Re-framed**

As we expanded the question beyond the mosque to the broader issue of religion itself in securing acceptance and support for queer Muslims, the conversations often were split. The prevailing view was that the “entry point” for the discussion should be human or civil rights and not religion. Opening the conversation with religious arguments made the subject a non-starter for many in our group.

There were others — though clearly a minority — who felt that religion was precisely the place to start. Four of our more than 50 participants were practicing imams. Their insights, coupled with writings, research and one-on-one conversations in the theological arena, led us to conclude, contrary to what some expressed,<sup>14</sup> that there are a variety of interpretations of

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<sup>13</sup> For an annotated listing of both domestic and international LGBT Rights organizations and web-based resources, see Shaikh, p.4-8.

<sup>14</sup> In our survey more than 20 percent agreed with the statement that “The Qur’an is the word of God and is to be taken literally, word for word.”

the Holy Qur'an. One woman in Chicago saw the Qur'an as quite clear on the issue and saw a danger in "legitimizing" practices that were condemned there. Indeed, more than 52 percent in our survey either strongly or somewhat agreed with the statement that the Qur'an condemns all forms of homosexual behavior. Others argued that the Qur'an was not at all clear on this subject. A New York participant pointed out that it was *hadith*<sup>15</sup> and not the Qur'an that formed the organizing structure for Muslim society, so that the real questions for Muslims were around what *hadith* had to say on this and other issues.

Most who thought that religious expression was the place to start this conversation believed that the Qur'an was the right entry point, focusing on the great human variety created by Allah and blessed by the Prophet and Allah's call to mercy and compassion as a true sign of Islam.<sup>16</sup> To do so required an *iftihad* (individual and independent readings of the holy text in order to derive a law or a ruling) of texts that had been distorted by cultural proclivities, patriarchy and the desire of those in power to perpetuate the status quo.

Samar Habib states in the introduction to her two-volume set, *Islam and Homosexuality*:

A queer-friendly Islamic hermeneutic begins by, first, rejecting the unauthenticated *hadith* that discuss homosexuality that early *fiqh* scholars relied on and, secondly, by deprogramming the belief that the story of Lut [Lot] in the Qur'an is a story about homosexuals or, worse yet, a story about *all* homosexuals that ever were or were ever to be.<sup>17</sup>

The call from many in our groups was that *iftihad* (reinterpretation or re-emphasis) should emphasize Allah the merciful and the basis for behavior towards gay and lesbian Muslims (and LGBT folks of other faiths) should be rooted in compassion instead of judgment. As one D.C. convert to Islam said, "I didn't come to Islam through an intellectual activity, but because my sense of right and wrong was informed by the idea of Allah's justice and mercy." In New York, one imam stressed that "praying without proper regard for standards of behavior is inappropriate," while another wondered, "Are we allowing our ideology to overcome our compassion?" Samar Habib again:

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<sup>15</sup> *Hadith* are narrations concerning the words and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad. *Hadith* are regarded by traditional Islamic schools of jurisprudence as important tools for understanding the Qur'an. *Hadith* were evaluated and gathered into large collections during the 8th and 9th centuries.

<sup>16</sup> For a thoughtful discussion and practical applications of how to understand the Qur'an as being open to and supportive of an LGBT inclusive vision, go to [www.daayiee.com](http://www.daayiee.com).

<sup>17</sup> Samar Habib; Introduction; *Islam and Homosexuality*; p.lvi; the story of Lot is central to the discussion of homosexuality in Islam because it is the basis for the traditional focus on condemnation homo-erotic behavior. The subject came up in all of our groups and was addressed in each of the three articles commissioned for this project: Rashid, p.3-4; Shaikh, p.1-2; Aisha Geissinger; *Islam and Same-Sex Sexuality in History: Cultural and Religious Perspectives*, p.8-9.

We do not accept the authoritative claim that only a select group of clergy is alone capable of deciphering the religious texts and producing exegesis of these texts, as this creates far greater institutional monopoly and stasis than is healthy for human cultures that are inevitably dynamic and in constant flux.<sup>18</sup>

On several occasions, the struggle for LGBT equality among Muslims (at least in the United States) was likened to the struggle within Christianity, both during the Reformation and in the liberation theologies of a generation ago. Many of the “religious arguments” (both pro and con) that surfaced in our discussions were resonant with questions about the authority and interpretation of scripture that queer Christians fought decades ago and continue to fight today. One successful strategy for them has been a re-framing of the issue in Christianity away from the Leviticus texts of “abomination and judgment” in favor of a starting point in Genesis where human beings are created in the image and likeness of God.<sup>19</sup> Samar Habib speaks of a distinctly Islamic theology that is affirming to queer Muslims:

The most predominant strategy is that “God is great and merciful,” a narrative that emphasizes, in addition to His forgiveness, “His” creation and willing of alternative sexualities. Because gay Muslims are able to see their sexualities as neither simple choices they can reverse nor products of social construction, God’s involvement in their being this way, in His creating them this way, provides great comfort and the basis for embracing this critical difference.<sup>20</sup>

Patriarchy reared its ugly head several times throughout our conversations and was deemed as a strong prohibiting factor in the failure to achieve free expression around issues of both gender and sexual orientation within the Muslim community. Both men and women felt this way, although women were particularly strong on this issue. Says Aisha Geissinger in her article commissioned for this project:

The [pre-modern] textual sources available to us were written by elite, urban, free males, often with the goal of setting the ideals for society. Thus many of these sources represent what these elite men thought people “should” feel and behave. The sources tell us relatively little about how people actually felt and acted.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Habib; p.lx.

<sup>19</sup> For resources in the Christian tradition that address the question of LGBT justice, equality and welcome, go to [www.believeoutloud.org](http://www.believeoutloud.org).

<sup>20</sup> Habib, p. l.

<sup>21</sup> Geissinger, footnote 2.

The linkage of gender equality to LGBT justice and inclusion also was clearly and frequently made. In Dearborn, more than one female participant lamented that despite the fact they were born in the United States, they were still treated as if they lived in remote villages, complete with restrictions that did not seem to make sense. Domestic violence came up time and again as another taboo issue that was linked to abuse of queer Muslims. The differentiation between public and private behavior was an important issue. In a one-on-one conversation with an imam, he said that what was done within the privacy of the home was between the family members and Allah. Many in our groups offered a strong dissent. Muslims, they said, will not be able to deal with LGBT justice until the community can first confront forthrightly abuse of women within the home. Both of these issues, it was said, must be addressed in order to achieve a healthy Muslim community.

### **History and Culture; Practice and Identity**

These concerns moved conversations seamlessly into the role that history and culture plays in this controversy. Aisha Geissinger reminds us that “as we consider pre-modern Muslim attitudes towards gender minorities and same-sex desires and acts, we must remember that it is impossible to speak about a single Muslim cultural or religious ‘position’ on these issues.”<sup>22</sup> And that reality opens the door to one of the primary distinctions between Islam and the West in viewing homosexuality: the difference between “practice” and “identity.” Scholars<sup>23</sup> and participants in our conversations alike agreed that there is a vastly different worldview about this issue in Muslim majority countries and in the West. The guiding principle in ethical behavior for Muslim societies lies in social and familial stability and so it is of the highest ethical value for both men and women (but especially men) to partake in a family structure, to procreate and to be socially upright.

Once a man meets these criteria, he is often free to experiment with same-sex relationships as an “alternative,” but this does not make him a homosexual. The imposition of “identity” and “identity politics” (which was sometimes referred to in our groups, especially in Los Angeles, as “modernity”), was seen routinely as a Western construct that has been imposed on the Muslim world — within the United States, but also globally. Though one young Chicago participant quipped, “If you were born Chinese, you can’t be Irish,” there was resistance to the notion that homosexuality is a “problem” in Islam (hence Ahmadinejad’s response at Columbia University).

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<sup>22</sup> Aisha Geissinger, p.1.

<sup>23</sup> “Over the last decades, the advance of the gay-identity movement has radicalized and, in certain cases, resulted in transformation of the traditional social and political norms of the West. This radicalization involves a movement away from a concept limited to *same-sex practices*, which does not pre-suppose an individual’s self-definition by his or her sexuality, toward a concept of an exclusively *gay identity*. In other words, Western societies have ... shifted the focus away from *practicing* homosexuality to *being* homosexual”; Kramer, p. 133.

Participants from both Egypt and India indicated that shame and stigma around sexuality were qualities that were “leftovers” from British colonialism and not Qur’anic in their origins. Many agreed that American preoccupation with sexuality has led to distorted notions of what is acceptable and what is not, offering that the taboos around same-sex relationships is a contrived Western phenomenon imposed on the Muslim world. Hussein Rashid:

The question of “naturalness” highlighted the division between cultural norms and scriptural precedent. [Scott] Kugle argues that the Qur’an, the holy book of Muslims, does not use the discourse of “natural” and “unnatural.” The terms were borrowed from engagement with European Christian discourses on homosexuality. In fact, the Qur’an acknowledges that there are men who may not be attracted to women.<sup>24</sup>

Munir Shaikh concurs:

In Muslim societies, there is no linguistic foundation for the term “homosexual.” Along the same lines, there are no “heterosexuals.”...The growing panoply of terms signifying sex- and gender-based identities — lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, cisgender, etc. — are clearly modern and remain largely absent from current Muslim discourses, just as they were once absent in the European and North American contexts ... The status of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) issues in Muslim societies, like virtually all other social and political concerns, is colored by the impact of colonialism in Asia, Africa and the Middle East.<sup>25</sup>

Cultural overlays give further nuance to this, especially as it is ascribed to the traditional social practice of older men being attracted to young boys. Says Geissinger:

The concepts of “homosexuality” and “heterosexuality” do not exist in medieval Muslim texts, either as terms or as ideas ... Same-sex sexual desires and acts are openly portrayed and discussed in medieval Arabic poetry and literature. Men’s erotic attractions to male adolescents are celebrated in poetry in the Formative Period.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Rashid, p.3-4.

<sup>25</sup> Shaikh, p.1-2.

<sup>26</sup> Geissinger, p.4, 6.

One of our participants grew up in India and offered the fact that he was one of those young boys to whom older men were drawn. “There was no stigma,” he said. “It was a common practice. But when I moved to this country, I realized that here it is not acceptable. Actually, by U.S. standards, I was sexually abused as a boy.” The struggle in navigating these cross-cultural seas was evident in his eyes and in his voice; yet, this is a common hurdle for immigrant Muslims in this country, not only around LGBT issues, but around many aspects of American life that non-Muslims take for granted. It is a complicating factor in developing a strategy for justice and inclusion of queer Muslims within the fabric of U.S. social interactions.

There was considerable conversation in the Washington, D.C., gathering about the difference, in traditional thinking, between being the aggressive male and the passive male in same-gender coital relations, and that all this was actually not related to sex at all, but to preserving the societal status quo. As Geissinger writes:

An adult man’s desire to be penetrated by a male was seen as pathological, and in need of medical explanation ... A man’s desire to play the active role of penetrator in sexual relationships was in accordance with generally held notions of masculinity and a “proper” social order. A man’s wish to be penetrated, or the idea of women preferring sex with other women rather than men, were seen as threatening to the “proper” order.<sup>27</sup>

Bisexuality was rarely mentioned in our conversations and the transgender community was also frequently not addressed in our dialogues. There is discussion in the articles, and on one occasion in Los Angeles, about how acceptance of practices and even identities is contingent upon cultural expression. A Pakistani-American participant told the delightful story about how, upon returning to his homeland, he learned that it was customary for someone from the transgender community to be invited to celebratory events. As he exclaimed, “If there wasn’t a transgender person at your party, it just wasn’t a party!” This acceptance — while easy prey to stereotyping by U.S. standards — is nevertheless indicative of acceptance of diverse sexual orientations among traditional Muslim cultures. Aisha Geissinger reminds us of the historic place of transgender persons in Muslim societies:

Among those gendered “not men,” there were a variety of categories that do not fit our expectations of male and female as distinct gender categories. The *mukhannaaths* of Medina are perhaps the most well known of the Formative

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<sup>27</sup> Geissinger, p.7-8.

Period. The term *mukhannaths* refers to men who seem to have worn some items of female clothing, adorned themselves in a way reserved for women, and were assumed to lack sexual interest in women. It is reported that the Prophet allowed a *mukhannath* to visit with his wives in private as long as the person did not demonstrate any erotic interest in women. Thus their ambiguous gender afforded them an equally ambiguous social rank that allowed them to cross articulated boundaries of gendered social segregation.<sup>28</sup>

Cultural consideration, of course, moved from intriguing academic exercises to the front page and exploded in complexity for American Muslims on September 11, 2001. The terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon and the subsequent “war on terror” (along with its corollary — and ongoing — media onslaught that characterizes all Muslims as terrorists) has created an additional layer of navigation for women and queer Muslims in the United States. As one participant in Los Angeles proclaimed, “Islamophobia is the big picture. Deal with that first.” Hussein Rashid states:

In the limited number of ethnographies we have of homosexual Muslims in the Anglophone world, there is still a strong sense of ascriptive identification based on race and religion that alienates Muslims from the broader umbrella of “queer.”

In a recent BBC report on homosexual Muslims in the UK, one interviewee described an experience she had at a gay pride rally. She says, “There was an occasion at gay pride once where one of the marchers turned round and quite crudely said, ‘We didn’t know pride was allowing suicide bombers on the march’ — it was really shocking to hear that from a fellow gay marcher. The intersection of an affirmative declaration of gay and Muslim identifications runs into ascriptive identification of Muslims as terrorists.”<sup>29</sup>

But others in our groups saw the comparison between Islamophobia and homophobia as a common touch point. One D.C. parent cited bullying of young Muslims and gay kids as a common link for cooperation. He called it a “cognitive opening” to forge solidarity among these two often marginalized groups.

### **The Power of Personal Stories**

We used two media segments as part of our convenings — a scene from the film *Jihad for Love* by Parvez Sharma and the student film *Muslima Q* by Christina Clare from NYU, who is

<sup>28</sup> Geissinger, p. 3-4.

<sup>29</sup> Rashid, p.5-6.

both a recent convert to Islam and also bisexual. Christina talks about “coming out” three times in her life — first as a bisexual person to her peers, then as a Muslim convert to her Christian family and, finally, as a bisexual Muslim to her coreligionists.

Christina’s movie gives voice to the importance of storytelling. Her personal journey became instructive for others, as hearts as well as minds were engaged by the process of being able to share in a safe space. Our conversations often became deeply personal. One woman “came out” to our group. One self-identified lesbian in Dearborn lamented that as a lesbian, she had been influenced by the West and hence was less of a Muslim and less of a person. Another pleaded, “Where is the middle ground in the Muslim community?” and yet another haltingly posed the hypothetical question, “Would a woman abort a fetus if she knew it was gay?” One’s sexuality lies close to one’s core and the courage to share personal stories, the openness to address difficult issues forthrightly, and the acceptance that participants displayed towards one another time and again were inspirational.

With deep emotion, one young New York woman recalled how daughters of immigrant parents are threatened with being “sent home” to the country of their ancestry if they do not adhere to cultural and religious traditions. Even for those who are not recent immigrants (less than 25 percent of our participants had *both* parents born in the United States), the way through this cultural/religious minefield is fraught with difficulty.

One woman asked, “How do you even start this conversation?” Indeed, almost 87 percent in our survey called this conversation either somewhat or very difficult (54 percent saying “very difficult”). Another projected that if she were a lesbian and came out to her family, they would never speak to her again. During introductions, participants in our groups were asked why they had come. One man in Washington offered, “I am here for my children; it is important to live in a society where you can have a healthy discourse.” One New York woman, who described herself as very liberal, worried because she feared her teenage daughter was a lesbian and she didn’t know how she would respond if she should learn that to be the case. And then she became upset with herself for being so locked into age-old fears. Another spoke about the ultimate decision: “When you come out, it means that you are no longer Muslim.” Again, these reactions are not unique to Muslims, but because of the added pressure on the Muslim community in the United States to be “socially acceptable” lest they be perceived as terrorists or terrorist sympathizers, there is an added layer of stress that can foster dysfunction and distrust within families and communities and with the wider world. Says Samar Habib:

If anything stands in the way [of new paradigms] being taken seriously by the mainstream of the Muslim world, it is the perception that Islam as a millennium-

old tradition is under threat from a Western imperialist project. As such, anyone not seeking to maintain the status quo is easily alienated as a saboteur, dismissed as an infiltrator, or as a Westernized and hence inauthentic Muslim. Gay, lesbian and transgender Muslims are the latest to be unjustly relegated to this group of saboteurs. This is why when faithful Muslims who are also homosexual or transgender have attempted to engage the mainstream Muslim world about their gender or sexual orientation and their relationship to their faith and Allah, they have been attacked by mainstream media in the Arab world.<sup>30</sup>

A regret articulated by facilitators of these conversations on more than one occasion was that this experience could not have been witnessed by the American public. The rich diversity within the Muslim community, the respectful disagreements that took place during the course of the conversations, the thoughtful manner and sensitive insights with which the topic was addressed, the appreciation for living in a country where such a conversation *could* take place, and the continual returning to the root of a merciful and compassionate God in building a theological/religious foundation for inclusion of all is not a perception of American Muslims widely shared by non-Muslims in this country.

There were four imams among the 50-plus participants in our gatherings. On one occasion, it was most interesting to see two of them disagree — passionately, but without rancor or disrespect — while others watched and learned. A question arose as to if and how to engage the clergy in subsequent steps that might be taken in support of the LGBT community. There was disagreement about whether to begin in the religious community or in academia or among activists. A participant in New York asked, “How do we get to the imams?” which drew the curious response from a young woman present: “Focus on the students.” The answer may be some combination of all three but, ultimately, the religious community must be engaged if LGBT Muslims will ever find full acceptance and equality.

As we contemplate contemporary realities, it is immediately apparent that younger, second- and third-generation American Muslims have a greater tolerance for this issue than do their parents and grandparents. This is true in society generally and we found it true in our conversations as well. While most young people acknowledged the perspective of their elders, they saw these views as locked into an outdated worldview that was no longer relevant to them.

“Media” came up frequently, usually in a negative way; but in a sense, there was grudging acknowledgement that media can be an ally in the struggle for authentic LGBT equality among Muslims in the United States. The media has the ability to both change perceptions

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<sup>30</sup> Samar Habib, ed.; *Islam and Homosexuality*, Volume 1; Praeger; 2010; introduction; p.xxvi-xxvii.

through framing and to project points of view through the selection of events and characters to feature. Add the power and proclivity of social networking on top of this reality, and it becomes apparent that any strategy that promotes change must include both traditional media and social networking components.

The overwhelming sentiment expressed in our conversations was that this discussion was important to have<sup>31</sup> and that “no one is having it.” One professor, in a one-on-one conversation, offered that taking the lead in this important dialogue might be a distinct role that American Muslims play within the world Muslim community. The focus on creating safe spaces where all voices and perspectives are honored became a key ingredient in the successful eliciting of comments from participants, and was deeply appreciated among those who gathered. Safe space is critical for honest sharing and personal story telling.

### **The Way Forward**

As we moved into a conversation about “next steps,” in order to see how the queer Muslim community might be supported, two distinct strategies emerged. Some thought that it was most important to nurture the fledgling LGBT “movement” within Islam. At our Dearborn gathering in particular, basic needs — organizing, messaging, collaboration, resource gathering, community building — became apparent. Even identity formation as a community seems to have barely begun. One possible route for future work is to focus time, energy and resources on equipping these groups, providing “movement leaders” with expertise to develop skill sets that can help them gain a stronger voice within the *ummah* and in the wider public arena.

“Tool kits” for starting welcoming *masjids* (mosques) — containing everything from practical suggestions on how to secure space and do a newsletter to theological matters such as new understandings of Qur’anic texts — could be created and distributed for those in university communities like Los Angeles, San Francisco, Washington, D.C., Boston, New York, Lansing, Mich., and elsewhere where there is critical mass for gatherings. Building a network that enables such fragile groups to be in touch with one another also would be valuable.

One caveat to this approach is that cultural barriers coupled with Islamophobia render it impractical and even inappropriate for queer Muslim groups to join with other LGBT advocates. Hussein Rashid reminds us, “The intersection of sexual, religious, racial, and immigrant identities entail multiple types of marginalization.”<sup>32</sup> As was stated earlier, there is deep-seated Islamophobia within the LGBT community, leaving queer Muslims even more vulnerable than other queer constituencies. LGBT Muslims face particular challenges that require specialized attention that may not be addressed

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<sup>31</sup> More than 81 percent in our survey said that it was somewhat or very important for the Muslim community in the US to support the issue of gay and lesbian equality.

<sup>32</sup> Rashid, p.7.

in secular or Judeo-Christian queer groups. A caveat was also raised in our Washington, D.C., gathering that acceptance of LGBT persons should not be seen as a litmus test for integration. There must be a variety of opinions in Islam that can live side-by-side.

The second route is to continue (as we have tried to do with this project) to build awareness and sensitivity to the issue of LGBT Muslims within the wider Muslim community. Continued use of dialogues and other convenings to raise a topic that is often considered taboo or best dealt with in a “don’t ask, don’t tell” manner was viewed with great enthusiasm by many in our groups. Said one person from Dearborn, simply, “Let’s just talk.”

This becomes anything but simple when seen through the eyes of a social worker who attended our second New York convening. Her poignant story underscored the conflict between offering professional counsel to a young client struggling with her sexuality and the potential “shunning” her organization would receive for giving advice that ran counter to cultural mores of the community.

One person in our Los Angeles convening suggested having a “traveling panel” comprised of a broad section of academics, activists and religious thinkers to reprise the conversation in an ever-widening circle so that it might become a tipping point in which three things happen: the existence of queer Muslims is acknowledged and honored as part of the community; conversations about the role of LGBT Muslims no longer need to happen behind closed doors; and mosques and other community organizations welcome participation in the wider community.

Not surprisingly, at our gathering in Los Angeles, the idea of encouraging story tellers in the media and entertainment fields to take a more nuanced view of Muslim characters would make for another strategy to help sensitize the general public about queer Muslims. Also, while it was acknowledged that there are many pitfalls, realistic portrayals of intimacy between a Muslim man and woman would be a constructive step towards creating healthy portraits of LGBT Muslims. Intimacy is indicative of a positive practice of sexuality and, when it comes to Muslim characters, it is almost totally absent from television and cinema. One clear outcome of our study: whatever strategy is developed for moving forward, it must include a media component and a social networking strategy.

There is one additional consideration that must be taken seriously as we consider how to move forward. This project was originally conceived to be clearly targeted to a domestic audience, but as our experiences in the convenings revealed, and as recent events in North Africa and the Middle East further confirm, we live in a globalized world. Nothing we do in this country will exist in a vacuum but, rather, will reverberate across the planet. Approaches to problems here, however, cannot be directly transposed onto other societies with differing worldviews.

While any steps moving forward should include an international component, the words of Parvez Sharma, director of the film *Jihad for Love*, serve as a sobering reminder of the challenges ahead:

I have never thought that the pride marches or the recreation of the gay ghettos of the West would ever be the solution in Tehran or Islamabad. I have witnessed the endless debates that diasporic Muslims engage in the cool, air-conditioned corridors of Western academia, employing languages of emancipation we have developed mostly in the West. In Cairo, in Delhi, and in Jakarta, the realities of life beyond the taps that run dry or the power outages that punctuate days and nights are completely different. The limited and limiting languages of Western labels and constructs are just not an option. Being a recent transplant into the West myself, I have marveled at the need for constant labels and self-identification that many minorities in majority Caucasian societies have felt. I have seen just how profoundly the lines between the public and the private have been blurred in many of these nations, and how little of that is permissible “back home.” Approaching from the perspective of a “person of color” (a disingenuous term, in my humble opinion) to L and G and B and T and Intersex and Queer and even two-spirit, I have realized that these categorizations perhaps serve their constituents in the West better than they would ever in the problematically labeled third world. A cursory look at Islam’s many histories reveals a dichotomous and simultaneous celebration of homosexuality and an invisibility of the sexual life. Much of the very need for invisibility often remains couched in the sanctity of the institution of heterosexual marriage and the centrality of the family unit. Clearly, to me at least, the solutions, if indeed there is a need for any within Islamic cultures, will need to come from the Muslims who inhabit them.<sup>33</sup>

In conclusion, and not surprisingly, most in our groups opted for a middle path. One imam in New York asked the question, “How do we inject solace and boundaries between the religionists and the activists?” He encouraged bringing “solace to the soul.” “Take care of the soul first,” he said; while a Chicago participant called us to “consultation and not confrontation.” The key question for American Muslims, of course, was articulated by a New York participant, “How would the Prophet have responded?”

We offer that this is a critical conversation in a transformational time. We recommend that resources be found to institute a two-track follow-up that equips groups of queer Muslims

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<sup>33</sup> Parvez Sharma; *Islam and Homosexuality*; Volume 1; forward; p.xiii-xiv.

to service their members more effectively and that sensitizes the wider Muslim community to the needs of this particular constituency within its ranks. As queer Muslim leaders emerge into positions of strength and support from among their peers, and as the wider community is better equipped to receive this leadership, counsel and participation, the Muslim community and the whole world will be enriched. The goal is to assist in this journey, as Munir Shaikh outlines in the concluding paragraph of his article:

LGBT Muslims will become more visible and vocal in the coming years. Their struggle is two-fold: overcoming a type of homophobia among coreligionists that is ironically more a product of modernity than of Islamic civilization, and overcoming Islamophobia within the broader gay community. In fact, LGBT Muslims are in a position to shed light on the shared DNA of Islamophobic and homophobic discourses that continue to animate the public square, and eventually help overcome them.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Shaikh, p.10.

# The Name Game: Understanding Tensions in Identity and Muslim Homosexuality

By Hussein Rashid

## Introduction

One of the key difficulties we encounter when trying to discuss the status of homosexuality in Muslim thought and cultures is one of definition. This is not to say that the issues are purely semantic. Rather, the tension this paper is interested in is the one between identity and identification. The three areas where we focus our investigation are historical — primarily through literature — theological, and contemporary cultural.

For definitional purposes, we consider an identity to be composed of multiple identifications. As an example, a person can be both male and a stamp collector. Some of these identifications are relatively unchanging (male), whereas others are more dynamic and voluntary (stamp collector). Identity is constructed out of the relationship among various identifications, and how an individual chooses to affiliate with various identifications. The voluntary association with one or more identifications is an affirmative declaration. The affirmative identification is in contrast to the ascriptive identification, when an external agent forces an individual to choose an identification as a primary marker, or assign certain characteristics to an individual based on his or her identification.

As we look at various approaches to the question of homosexuality in Muslim cultures and thought, the issue of affirmative and ascriptive identification is one of the key lenses through which we can understand the discourse. In the pre-modern period, we witness a more fluid sense of identifications, and the danger is that we ascribe modern notions of identification to the categories of “homosexual” and “Muslim.” In the theological realm, modern thinkers actually favor more ascriptive qualities to homosexual identification. In contemporary cultural contexts, we will investigate how the qualities ascribed to Muslims in the “War on Terror” impact development of a homosexual identification.

## Historical/Literary

In terms of understanding the fluidity of pre-modern identifications, there are two key works. Dominique Sila-Khan’s work on religious identification in South Asia<sup>1</sup> argues that the

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<sup>1</sup> Dominique Sila-Khan, *Crossing the Threshold: Understanding Religious Identities in South Asia* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2003). cf. Peter Gottschalk, *Beyond Hindu and Muslim: Multiple Identity in Narratives From Village India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

categories of what it means to be Muslim or Hindu were not categorized until fairly late into the 19th century. While her work is not entirely relevant to the discussion at hand, it is a useful reminder that self-conceptions of religious belonging are fairly fluid. Part of that fluidity of identity is that formal religious structures were not as clearly defined as they are now. A ritual action, for example, could be practiced by both Hindus and Muslims, and be authentically Hindu or Muslim. In a more formal way, there was a sense that actions, with certain limited exceptions, would not put someone outside the fold of Islam. For example, Khaled El-Rouayheb suggest that medieval jurists argued for the concealment of another's sin if people knew of it.<sup>2</sup> The jurists were more interested in repeated and/or public violations of religious law.

It is within this context that Stephen Murray and Will Roscoe were able to compile a broad-ranging survey of how homosexualities are expressed in a wide variety of Muslim contexts, both in terms of literary expression and modern culture.<sup>3</sup> The definitional question of "heterosexuality" and "homosexuality" is integral in understanding how this cultural acceptance comes into being. Valerie Traub argues that we need to understand a difference between "heterosexuality" and "heteronormativity."<sup>4</sup> She argues that many of the rules regarding regulation of sex and marriage were heteronormative, in that they were interested in "religiously sanctioned marriage, the patriarchal household, reproductive imperatives, and women's enclosures in domestic spaces."<sup>5</sup> This distinction is important, because she approaches the issue from a partially social constructivist perspective: heterosexuality as a norm is created, and it cannot be created in the absence of its other, homosexuality. The implication is that the modern notion of homosexuality could not have existed in the pre-modern period, because the idea of heterosexuality did not exist.

Scott Kugle echoes this point, but makes it through a slightly different approach. Although Kugle is dealing with the modern, this section of his work seems applicable to the pre-modern period as well. He discusses "behavioral bisexuals" who engage in "situational homosexuality."<sup>6</sup> In addressing behavioral bisexuality, Kugle argues that men engage in physically intimate acts with other men, although they have no desire for men. One of the reasons for these actions is the lack of access to women for sexual release and comfort. Kugle is clear that men in this situation would not fit our modern definition of homosexual and, in fact, would condemn and attack their same-sex partners in the proper context.

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<sup>2</sup> Khaled El-Rouayheb, *Before Homosexuality in the Arab-Islamic World, 1500-1800* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 123.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen O. Murray and Will Roscoe, *Islamic Homosexualities: Culture, History, and Literature* (New York: New York University Press, 1997).

<sup>4</sup> Valerie Traub, "The Past is a Foreign Country? The Times and Spaces of Islamicate Sexuality Studies," in *Islamicate Sexualities: Translations Across Temporal Geographies of Desire*, ed. Kathryn Babayan and Afsaneh Najmabadi (Cambridge, Mass.: Center for Middle Eastern Studies of Harvard University: Distributed by Harvard University Press, 2008), 23.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Scott A. Kugle, *Homosexuality in Islam: Critical Reflection on Gay, Lesbian and Transgender Muslims* (Richmond: Oneworld, 2009), 10.

The result of these interactions was the normalization of men being intimate with other men, particularly adolescent males. A distinction must be made between the naturally androgynous adolescent (*amrad*) and the man who attempts to recapture that androgyny, or otherwise expresses “feminine” qualities (*mukhannath*).<sup>7</sup> The latter is almost always condemned, whereas the former becomes such an integral part of certain cultures that *amradparast*, young-boy-worship, must be actively condemned. In this discussion, the love for a young boy is now seen as an indicator of the acceptability of homosexuality. However, desire is only part of the equation in defining homosexuality.

Ibn Hazm (d. 1064), a jurist in the now-dormant Zahiri school of thought, argued for the equality of hetero- and homoerotic love, suggesting that both are equally valid ways of learning to love God. However, he too drew a distinction between loving another man and the legality of sex acts between men.<sup>8</sup> Sherman Jackson, a modern specialist on modernity and Muslim law, made a similar argument at the 2009 Shuruq Conference hosted at NYU, drawing a distinction between desire and acts.<sup>9</sup>

One of the critiques of the Murray and Roscoe volume is that it does not draw a strong enough distinction between desire and act, creating modern notions of homosexuality when none may have existed. Traub, in her critique, also suggests that the volume is simply “reversing an ethnocentric presupposition of Western privilege and progress.”<sup>10</sup> The problem with this approach, in her view, is that it simplifies what we mean by “West” and by “homosexual,” thereby reducing our ability to talk about these categories in any meaningful way. Afsaneh Najmabadi also implicitly critiques the approach of Murray and Roscoe, talking about how cultural interaction affects notions of “the homosexual.” For example, she talks about how the *amrad* went from an object of desire to an object of ridicule at the turn of the 20th century in Iran.<sup>11</sup> Part of the reason for this change was the Iranian engagement with European powers who argued against the “naturalness” of desiring *amrad*.

## Theological/Legal

The question of “naturalness” highlights the division between cultural norms and scriptural precedent. Kugle argues that the Qur’an, the holy book of Muslims, does not use

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<sup>7</sup> Afsaneh Najmabadi, “Types, Acts, or What? Regulation of Sexuality in Nineteenth-Century Iran,” in *Islamicate Sexualities: Translations Across Temporal Geographies of Desire*, ed. Kathryn Babayan and Afsaneh Najmabadi (Cambridge, Mass.: Center for Middle Eastern Studies of Harvard University; Distributed by Harvard University Press, 2008), 276.

<sup>8</sup> Scott A. Kugle, *Homosexuality in Islam: Critical Reflection on Gay, Lesbian and Transgender Muslims*, 27.

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HisIwWhyU34> cf. BBC’s 5 Live Investigates program of 20 Feb. 2011, which hosts a panel discussion on this issue (<http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/podcasts/5live/5liveinvestigates/rss.xml>) and Adrian Goldberg, “British Gay Muslims Seek Islamic Weddings,” 2011. (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-12486003?SThisEM>).

<sup>10</sup> Valerie Traub, “The Past is a Foreign Country? The Times and Spaces of Islamicate Sexuality Studies,” 8.

<sup>11</sup> Afsaneh Najmabadi, “Types, Acts, or What? Regulation of Sexuality in Nineteenth-Century Iran,” 282-283.

the discourse of “natural” and “unnatural.” The terms were borrowed from engagement with European Christian discourses on homosexuality.<sup>12</sup> In fact, the Qur’an acknowledges that there are men who may not be attracted to women.<sup>13</sup> Kugle, as one of the most well known authors in this field, is concerned with taking Muslim traditions seriously and engaging it with more recent knowledge. He argues that “Muslims are willing to accept modern medical knowledge and techniques in an ad hoc manner to solve particular problems, but shy away from developing a coherent theory of the human personality based either upon medical practices and scientific discoveries or upon their own religious scripture.”<sup>14</sup>

For Kugle, in terms of understanding what homosexuality is, he adopts an “essentialist” position. In this position, he holds that people are inherently attracted to certain types of people, and that it is not a socially constructed identification.<sup>15</sup> This position, he believes, opens more avenues for changing minds on social relations, rather than just commenting on them. His point of entry into the Qur’anic tradition is the story of Lot.

Unlike the Bible, which is a narrative text, the stories of the Qur’an are often told in a fragmentary way, with pieces scattered throughout the corpus. In addition, some stories will be repeated with different emphases to highlight the relevant moral of the section. There is also a presupposition that the reader/listener will be aware of antecedents, including Biblical antecedents, that help make the story complete. However, the Qur’an will oftentimes introduce changes to biblical stories that are understood as “correctives” from a Muslim perspective. So, for example, in the binding story of Abraham, for Muslims it is his first-born son Ishmael who is taken, not Isaac.

The moral emphases of the stories being important, rather than the stories themselves, forms the basis of Amreen Jamal’s investigation into the story of Lot. Her basic premise is that modern notions of homosexuality do not map out on to the activities of the people of Lot, so we need to look at the Qur’anic story through a moral lens, not a lens of sexuality.<sup>16</sup> Kugle picks up this theme and argues that the Lot story in the Qur’an is “really about infidelity and how the Tribe of Lot schemed for ways to reject his Prophethood and his public standing in their community. Same-sex acts were only one of a range of actions that constituted their infidelity.”<sup>17</sup> He continues to argue, following Ibn Hazm, that the punishment for the people of Lot — Sodom and Gomorrah are never mentioned by name in the Qur’an — could not have been only about homosexuality as Lot’s wife, in addition to all the women and children of the town, are killed as well.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Scott A. Kugle, “Sexuality, Diversity, and Ethics in the Agenda of Progressive Muslims,” in *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender and Pluralism*, ed. Omid Safi (Oxford: Oneworld, 2003), 197.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Scott A. Kugle, *Homosexuality in Islam: Critical Reflection on Gay, Lesbian and Transgender Muslims*, 46.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>16</sup> Amreen Jamal, “The Story of Lot and the Qur’an’s Perception of the Morality of Same-Sex Sexuality,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 41, no. 1 (2001), 9.

<sup>17</sup> Scott A. Kugle, *Homosexuality in Islam: Critical Reflection on Gay, Lesbian and Transgender Muslims*, 51.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 53.

The focus on the moral message of the Lot passages suggested by Jamal and Kugle are well known amongst scholars in the field. One of the more interesting avenues of investigation that Kugle opens up is in the legal analysis. He quite forcefully argues that many of the legally prescribed punishments for homosexual acts are not based on the wording of the Qur'an, and in fact are based on analogy to adultery. He considers this position to be based on a legal fiction.<sup>19</sup>

There are five crimes for which *hadd* punishments are defined in the Qur'an. The word *hadd* means limit or restriction, and *hadd* crimes are the specific crime-penalty pairs outlined in the Qur'an. The five crimes are murder, highway robbery, theft, adultery between a man and a woman, and false accusations of adultery.<sup>20</sup> For each of these crimes, there are also strong evidentiary rules in place, and a chance for repentance.

Kugle is most interested in the crime of adultery (*zina*). In the classic legal tradition, homosexual acts are compared to *zina* based on analogy. The strongest parts of Kugle's critique rest on defining what *zina* is legally, and the evidentiary rules for *zina*. He argues that *zina* is "clearly applied to sexual penetration between a woman and man outside the bounds of a contractual relationship."<sup>21</sup> Reading this argument with Traub's argument,<sup>22</sup> one sees how the concern is with heteronormativity and the preservation of patriarchy, rather than with the promotion of heterosexuality. One avenue that Kugle does not pursue is that if the analogy is made with sex outside of a contractual agreement, homosexuals are currently prohibited from entering into a marriage contract. However, that limitation is not Qur'an, but extra-Qur'anic, thereby creating a situation where homosexuals are forced outside of the legal system, and then punished for being outside of it.<sup>23</sup> He does argue persuasively that the evidentiary rules for *zina* are not being adhered to in cases of homosexual acts. The rule is that the parties involved must either confess, or have four adult male witnesses testify that they saw the act.<sup>24</sup> The fact that this rule is generally not applied to homosexual acts speaks to a level of patriarchal homophobia that results in unequal application of the law.

### **Contemporary/Cultural**

For Muslims in minority contexts, particularly as recent immigrants, the situation becomes more complicated, as questions of race, religion, gender, and sexuality begin to intersect in new and unexpected ways. Traub argues that the "queer of color critique" attempts to bridge

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<sup>19</sup> Scott A. Kugle, "Sexuality, Diversity, and Ethics in the Agenda of Progressive Muslims," 201.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 216.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 201.

<sup>22</sup> See pg. 2 above.

<sup>23</sup> See note 9.

<sup>24</sup> See pg. 2 above, concerning the hiding of sins.

the divide in contemporary queer theory with critical race theory.<sup>25</sup> However, in the limited number of ethnographies we have of homosexual Muslims in the Anglophone world, there is still a strong sense of ascriptive identification based on race and religion that alienates Muslims from the broader umbrella of “queer.”

In a recent BBC report on homosexual Muslims in the UK, one interviewee described an experience she had at a gay pride rally. She says, “‘There was an occasion at gay pride once where one of the marchers turned around and quite crudely said, ‘we didn’t know pride was allowing suicide bombers on the march’ — it was really shocking to hear it from a fellow gay marcher.’”<sup>26</sup> The intersection of an affirmative declaration of gay and Muslim identifications runs into the ascriptive identification of all Muslims as terrorists.<sup>27</sup>

Both Ibrahim Abraham<sup>28</sup> and Omar Minwalla, et. al.,<sup>29</sup> have investigated the impact of the “war on terror” on gay Muslim identifications. Abraham fears that these identifications may become “compartmentalized,” only expressing themselves in safe spaces.<sup>30</sup> One implicit result is the lack of engagement of gay Muslims with non-gay Muslims, limiting discourse on these issues. He also argues that this compartmentalization leads to the commodification of religion, whereby “liberal respect for difference in the private sphere is typically paid for with public conformity, reinforcing hegemonic cultural norms.”<sup>31</sup> He does, however, see a bright spot in a semi-annual event known as Club Arak<sup>32</sup> that is promoted as a “Middle Eastern flavoured [sic] dance for queers of all colours [sic].” He sees the event as “redrawing the boundaries of political and social identification and belonging.”<sup>33</sup> He does not address how these identifications may also be commodified, especially considering one of his respondents says that the event is a way for people to “‘rebel against their Christian parents’” by combining “gay” and “Muslim” in one event.<sup>34</sup>

In terms of internal conversations, one of Minwalla’s respondents addresses the question of “homo-sociality.” The respondent says:

Here [in North America] I knew about gayness, but I think in Pakistan there’s really no concept of gay. You can be really intimate with another guy. I saw a lot

<sup>25</sup> Valerie Traub, “The Past is a Foreign Country? The Times and Spaces of Islamicate Sexuality Studies,” 9.

<sup>26</sup> Adrian Goldberg, “British Gay Muslims Seek Islamic Weddings,” (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-12486003?SThisEM>).

<sup>27</sup> Ibrahim Abraham, “‘Out to Get Us’: Queer Muslims and the Clash of Sexual Civilisations in Australia,” *Contemporary Islam* 3, no. 1 (2009), 84.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Omar Minwalla et al., “Identity Experience among Progressive Gay Muslims in North America: A Qualitative Study within Al-Fatiha,” *Culture* 7, no. 2 (2005): 113-128.

<sup>30</sup> Ibrahim Abraham, “‘Out to Get Us’: Queer Muslims and the Clash of Sexual Civilisations in Australia,” 85.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 85-87.

<sup>32</sup> Arak is a type of alcohol.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

of men holding hands and doing all sorts of stuff. But it was never seen as being something wrong. Here, you can't kiss a man in public, can you? I mean, it's allowed, but who does it? In Pakistan, there's a lot of intimacy allowed between men. It's not labeled and has nothing to do with a gay identity. It's fine there. Because [in the East] you are allowed to say, "You look beautiful." Adoring another male's body is okay, not like here [in the West].<sup>35</sup>

Although this phrasing does seem to fall into the earlier critique voiced by Traub, that counter-essentialism will not actually help to further a conversation,<sup>36</sup> it is useful to understand the dislocation immigrant gay Muslims experience in terms of what is considered "homosexual" behavior.

## Conclusion

What is apparent from these studies is that there is a greater need for ethnographies of gay Muslims in minority contexts, particularly as immigrants. The intersection of sexual, religious, racial, and immigrant identities entail multiple types of marginalization. If we can look at the past to understand cultural acceptance of homoerotic desires, we should see how those same strategies are or are not being employed today. As the volume *Islamicate Sexualities* indicates, we also need much stronger interdisciplinary work, including along theological and legal lines.

The theological concern seems to be three-fold. The first is one of desire, to which it is hard to find traditional scholars arguing is an a priori sin. The second is one of anal sex, which is consistently condemned in all traditional legal schools. The third is that of punishment, which, while currently being mis-employed, remains open to debate. It seems to this author that by focusing on areas one and three, for which there is already a wide consensus that *hadd* punishments are being applied in unintended ways, there may be greater change on the second issue. Of the framework of focusing on acts over desires, and how acts are to be witnessed and punished, then jurists can revisit the idea that anal sex is considered a crime. Rather than focusing on punishment, and looking for a crime, it moves the conversation into the realm of ethical teachings that may be present in the story of Lot.

It is also important to note that while this paper is ostensibly about homosexuality, most of the discussion focused on gay male Muslims. Lesbianism was clearly known amongst early

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<sup>35</sup> Omar Minwalla et al., "Identity Experience among Progressive Gay Muslims in North America: A Qualitative Study within Al-Fatiha," 120.

<sup>36</sup> See pg. 3 above.

Muslims,<sup>37</sup> but the legal basis for arguing against it is fairly weak.<sup>38</sup> As a result, much of the argument is extended from male homosexuality. If that early argument in the logic chain is made unsound, the result will affect rulings on lesbian sexual acts as well.

Ultimately, there needs to be a concerted effort to address the Orientalist sex-fantasies of the Middle East. Although this is already happening with respect to women and the role of women, Orientalist constructions of sexuality also included homosexuality, and it is a space that Middle East and Islamic Studies are still not addressing in a meaningful way.<sup>39</sup> However, what these disciplines have succeeded in doing is showing the wide variety of interpretations of Islam that exist. Because of the diversities of meanings of “Islam” and “homosexualities,” I echo Kugle who states, “It may not be inevitable that [they stand] ... in a relation of contradiction.”<sup>40</sup> It is the struggle to define and claim these identifications that will open new dialogues and new ways of belonging.

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<sup>37</sup> Sahar Amer, “Cross-Dressing and Female Same-Sex Marriage in Medieval French and Arabic Literatures,” in *Islamicate Sexualities: Translations Across Temporal Geographies of Desire*, ed. Kathryn Babayan and Afsaneh Najmabadi (Cambridge, Mass.: Center for Middle Eastern Studies of Harvard University; Distributed by Harvard University Press, 2008).

<sup>38</sup> Khaled El-Rouayheb, *Before Homosexuality in the Arab-Islamic World, 1500-1800*, 122.

<sup>39</sup> cf. Valerie Traub, “The Past is a Foreign Country? The Times and Spaces of Islamicate Sexuality Studies,” 11.

<sup>40</sup> Scott A. Kugle, “Sexuality, Diversity, and Ethics in the Agenda of Progressive Muslims,” 195.

## Islam and Same-Sex Sexuality in History: Cultural and Religious Perspectives

by Aisha Geissinger<sup>1</sup>

It is commonplace to point out that Islam is not a monolith. Despite images of Muslims praying in unison the world over, Muslims have always understood and practiced their religious tradition in keeping with the diverse cultural, social, economic, and political conditions of their different times and places. As we consider pre-modern Muslim attitudes towards gender minorities and same-sex desires and acts, we must remember that it is impossible to speak about a single Muslim cultural or religious “position” on these issues. But given the available sources,<sup>2</sup> we can safely say that before the 19th century CE, the assumptions that Muslims commonly made about the nature of gender and sexuality, as well as family and society, were significantly different from what is usual today.<sup>3</sup>

Today, it is generally thought that males and females are two different kinds of human being, with distinct types of bodies, but nonetheless equal. People are usually regarded as “naturally” belonging to one of two biological “opposite” sexes — “male” or “female.” A key component of their assumed “oppositeness” is the common presumption that heterosexuality is “natural” or inborn. In contemporary conservative Muslim religious discourses, there is an assumption that heterosexuality is central to ideas of what it is to be biologically “male” or “female,” as well as what it is to have a “proper” social order. For example, discourses about how women are to dress and behave, as well as about gender segregation are squarely based on two key assumptions: First, that males “naturally” and inevitably find the sight and sound of women sexually arousing and women “naturally” possess an inherent desire to attract male attention. Second, given the first assumption, that public life can be desexualized and cleansed of sexual temptation by carefully regulating all interactions between men and women who are not closely related to one another.

But in the Formative and Medieval Periods, gender was not understood as a male-female binary nor an emotional identity inherent to the sexed body. The cultural, social, economic,

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<sup>2</sup> This article relies on pre-modern texts to discuss cultural and religious attitudes to same-sex desires and acts. But texts cannot give us the whole picture. The textual sources available to us were written by elite, urban, free males, often with the goal of setting the ideals for society. Thus many of these sources represent what these elite men thought people “should” feel and behave. The sources tell us relatively little about how most people actually felt and acted. As research continues, it may be possible to arrive at a more comprehensive picture of medieval attitudes.

<sup>3</sup> By saying that pre-modern assumptions were different, I am not suggesting that they were better either in the sense of being more “enlightened” or that they were more “purely Islamic.” Pre-modern notions of gender and sexuality raise serious ethical questions for contemporary Muslims. Contemporary religious leaders tend to downplay or ignore practices that pre-modern scholars considered legitimate such as slave-concubinage and the marriage of minor girls (Ali 2008, esp. 39-55, 135-47). But these same Muslims will turn to pre-modern sources in order to support their belief that homosexuality is deviant.

and political factors in early and medieval Muslim Middle Eastern societies allowed for, if not fostered, an understanding of gender as a spectrum and an openness toward same sex desires. Human beings were placed on a gendered hierarchal spectrum determined by one's physical sex characteristics, one's status as a free or enslaved person, and other factors such as tribe or social standing. A person's position on this spectrum determined that person's rights and obligations in society and towards others. Free males were on top in this hierarchy with comprehensive rights and obligations over free women, enslaved men, and enslaved women.

Early Muslims shared and so readily accepted Ancient Greek medical theories of gender in which gender is understood as a social and legal category rather than as an inherent state of being. Free, able-bodied males were regarded as the most perfect and complete examples of humanity on this spectrum, and women only differed from them in degree rather than in kind. It was theorized that human bodies with sufficient heat and dryness would develop as male and those bodies lacking these qualities and dominated by cold and moistness remained undeveloped as females.<sup>4</sup> The early Qur'an commentator Abu Layth al-Samarqandi (d. 983) explains that men are natural guardians over women because they have greater intellectual skills than women, and that men have greater physical strength because they are "hot and dry"; whereas women are moist and cold, making them weaker and more pliant.<sup>5</sup>

While physically male bodies were considered the fully developed human form, simply being physically male was not sufficient to be gendered male. "Men" have specific rights and obligations qua men; but these rights and obligations are not extended to enslaved men. For instance, a married free man faced execution for the crime of adultery. But a married enslaved man was somehow less of a man and so less responsible for his actions; thus he would only receive lashes. The same holds for a male slave's culpability in crimes such as murder. Everett Rowson argues that the distinction made between free men and others is so profound the main social divide was between "[free] men" and "not-men" rather than "men" and "women."<sup>6</sup>

Among those gendered "not men," there were a variety of categories that do not fit our expectations of male and female as distinct gender categories. The *mukhannaths* of Medina are perhaps the most well known example from the Formative Period.<sup>7</sup> The term *mukhannaths* refers to men who seem to have worn some items of female clothing, adorned themselves in a way reserved for women, and were assumed to lack sexual interest in women. It is reported that the Prophet allowed a *mukhannath* to visit with his wives in private as long as the person did not demonstrate any erotic interest in women. Thus their ambiguous gender afforded them an equally ambiguous social rank that allowed them to cross articulated boundaries of gendered

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<sup>4</sup> Laqueur 1990, 26-28; Ze'evi 2006, 22-45.

<sup>5</sup> Abu Layth al-Samarqandi 1993, 1:351-52.

<sup>6</sup> Rowson 2003, 55.

<sup>7</sup> I.e. from Muhammad's lifetime to 950 CE.

social segregation with both men and women.<sup>8</sup> Islamic legal scholars ruled on gender and sexuality matters in terms of a spectrum rather than a binary. Because all human bodies were regarded as essentially the same — female bodies were differentiated from male ones by their incompleteness and deficiency — all sexual desires and acts were in a sense “same-sex” desires and acts.<sup>9</sup> The concepts of “homosexuality” and “heterosexuality” do not exist in medieval Muslim texts, either as terms or as ideas. Therefore, medieval scholars saw no contradiction between forbidding male-male anal intercourse in the strongest terms, while enjoying poetry that sympathetically describes a man’s emotional pain due to his unrequited love for a beautiful male youth.<sup>10</sup> Their condemnation for *liwat* (anal intercourse)<sup>11</sup> and their refusal to regard this sexual act as legally permissible in any context was clearly not motivated by a belief that romantic or erotic attractions between males are somehow intrinsically “unnatural” or disgusting.<sup>12</sup>

Rather, legal scholars were concerned about two major issues as they attempted to determine which sexual relationships were lawful: Reproduction in the sense of producing offspring, and reproduction of social hierarchies, which they saw as in accordance with God’s intent. Of these two considerations, the second appears to have carried more weight.<sup>13</sup> In their view, what makes marriage or concubinage between a man and a woman lawful is that the man exercises sexualized control over the woman. For instance, a valid marriage was based on different and unequal rights and duties: A man had the duty to pay a dower (*mahr*) and support his wife. The dower gave him the right to have sex with her and to unilaterally divorce her for any (or no) reason should he wish to do so. The wife had the right to dower and support, and the duty to obey her husband and submit to him sexually. Some pre-modern jurists considered the question of whether the rights and duties that free men and women have in marriage could be allocated differently. For example, could a woman gain the right to a unilateral divorce?<sup>14</sup> Or, if a free woman owns a male slave, could she exercise the rights that men have over their female slaves and take him as a concubine? Their answer was, emphatically, “No.”<sup>15</sup> Only males could be allowed to exercise such sexualized control, and only over females.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Rowson 1991, 671-693.

<sup>9</sup> Ze’evi 2006, 23.

<sup>10</sup> El-Rouayheb 2005, 136-39.

<sup>11</sup> Medieval Sunni scholars use the term *liwat* to refer specifically to anal intercourse (rather than to any other sexual act), whether between men or between a man and a woman (El-Rouayheb 2005, 137. The term *liwat* is drawn from the name of the prophet “Lot.”

<sup>12</sup> Significantly, medieval jurists ruled that sexual acts between males other than anal intercourse (such as kissing and fondling, or intercrural intercourse) should receive a punishment based on the discretion of the judge in the case. Vaginal intercourse between a male and a female who are neither husband and wife, nor master and slave, merits a far more severe punishment of 100 lashes for the unmarried perpetrators and stoning for the married (El-Rouayheb 2005, 138).

<sup>13</sup> While the production of offspring was an important consideration for the jurists, they did not forbid marriage or concubinage when one or both of the parties was infertile or too old to make reproduction likely.

<sup>14</sup> Ali 2008, 94-95.

<sup>15</sup> Ali 2010, 12-15.

<sup>16</sup> Ali 2008, 95.

Ironically, a perception of gender and sex characteristics as a spectrum that so nicely served the power of free males also allowed for the development and institutionalization of a variety of gendered categories that seems more open than perceptions typical of Muslims at present. In sum, gender and licit sexual pairings were determined by a number of factors having little to do with what we understand today to be a natural pairing between “equal and opposite sexes.”

### **Same-Sex Sexual Desires and Acts in Medieval Literature**

Same-sex sexual desires and acts are openly portrayed and discussed in medieval Arabic poetry and literature. Men’s erotic attractions to male adolescents are celebrated in poetry in the Formative Period. Some of this literature is intentionally transgressive, such as poetry penned by Abu Nuwas (d. 815) which explicitly describes anatomical details and sexual acts, while some other authors focus on romantic emotions, such as love and longing. Muhammad ibn Dawud’s *Book of the Flower*, written in the late ninth century, recounts homoerotic as well as heteroerotic poems and anecdotes; Ibn Dawud is said to have dedicated this book to his male beloved.<sup>17</sup>

In medieval Muslim sources, literary depictions of female same-sex desires and acts are much less common, but some do exist. These include romanticized portrayals, as well as erotic poetry and anecdotes. For example, the poet al-Farazdaq (d. ca. 728 or 730) and others use the image of Hind — the wife of a pre-Islamic Christian Arab king — keeping constant vigil at the grave of her female lover to represent sincere love and loyalty.<sup>18</sup> But we should assume that most surviving depictions of women’s same-sex eroticism probably say more about the fantasies and stereotypes held by their elite male authors (and their largely male audiences) than the experiences or desires of actual women.<sup>19</sup>

In a rare exception to this, a late 17th-century Persian woman wrote a poem depicting her close friendship with another woman. The poem reports that their friendship caused a scandal and as a result, they were forced to separate. After some time, the poet apparently tried to revive the relationship, but did not succeed. In Safavid Iran, it was socially acceptable for two women (or two men) to form a partnership, called an “avowed sisterhood” (or brotherhood), by pledging themselves to one another before God in this world and the next. We do not know if people generally considered these partnerships as platonic, romantic, or possibly sexual.<sup>20</sup> Women’s partnerships attracted harsh criticism from some Safavid religious scholars. The criticism seems to have been due to their perception that women’s ties to their avowed sisters might hold greater meaning for them than their relationships with their husbands.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Rowson 1997, 159, 166-67.

<sup>18</sup> Habib 2007, 30; Amer 2009, 218-19.

<sup>19</sup> Malti-Douglas 2001, 123-141.

<sup>20</sup> The Safavid Dynasty ruled from 1501 to 1722. These vows were termed *siqqah-yi khwahar khwandahgi* (or for men, *siqqah-yi ikhwat*). As Babayan points out, the Persian word “*siqqah*” usually refers to the Shi’i practice of temporary marriage.

<sup>21</sup> Babayan 2008, 239-274.

But what was the relationship between such homoerotic literature and lived reality? The popularity of male homoerotic romantic poetry indicates that men's romantic and erotic attractions to male youths — that men should fall in love with them, or want to court them or write poetry about them — was generally perceived as quite “natural,” at least from the ninth century on. On one hand, while *liwat* — playing the “active” role in anal sex — was regarded as a sinful act (more on this below), having the desire to do so was not seen as “unnatural,” or perverse, or as indicating that the man belonged to a sexual minority. Rather, it was perceived as a temptation that commonly befalls men. On the other hand, an adult man's desire to be penetrated by a male was seen as pathological, and in need of a medical explanation.<sup>22</sup> In a similar vein, some medieval authors sought to find “scientific” reasons why some women have same-sex sexual desires.<sup>23</sup>

These divergent attitudes appear to stem from the ways that these different same-sex sexual desires were believed to map onto the social order. A man's desire to play the “active” role of penetrator in sexual relationships was in accordance with generally held notions of masculinity and a “proper” social order. A man's wish to be penetrated, or the idea of women preferring sex with other women rather than with men, were seen as threatening to the “proper” social order in which free Muslim men were to be dominant, and only women ought to be sexually dominated.

### Same-sex Sexual Acts and Desires in Religious Texts

The Qur'an contains several retellings of the story of Lot, which recount that his people not only refused to heed his preaching, but also attempted to rape his angelic guests; as a result, God destroyed them.<sup>24</sup> In their interpretations of the Lot story in the Qur'an chapter 7, verses 80-84, medieval Qur'an commentators typically give emphatic condemnations of anal penetration — primarily of men by men, but also of women by men.<sup>25</sup> In their condemnations, the commentators relate *hadith*, reports about Muhammad, and quote rulings by early legal authorities about the proper punishment for male-male anal penetration.<sup>26</sup> By so doing, the story is made to underwrite jurists' views on how anal penetration should be penalized.

However, it is unclear whether the Qur'an actually stipulates any punishment for this, or for any other same-sex sexual act. While today the argument is sometimes made that the punishment for men's and women's same-sex sexual acts is outlined in chapter 4, verses 15-16 (4:15-16), pre-modern scholars are not in agreement on this point. Some pre-modern commentators, concerned with legal interpretations of the Qur'an, interpret these verses to refer

<sup>22</sup> El-Rouayheb 2005, 18-20.

<sup>23</sup> Amer 2009, 216-17; Habib 2007, 54, 71.

<sup>24</sup> For English translations of these passages, and some pre-modern interpretations of some aspects of them, see: Wheeler 2002, 118-126.

<sup>25</sup> e.g. Tabari 2001, 8:269-272; Tha'labi 2004, 3:47.

<sup>26</sup> e.g. Samarqandi 1993, 1:555-56; Tha'labi 2004, 3:48.

to the ways that fornication or adultery (*zina*) was punished during the early part of Muhammad's time in Medina.<sup>27</sup> Ibn Kathir (d. 1372) mentions that one early authority, Mujahid bin Jabr (d. 722), is reported to have said that this verse "was revealed regarding two men if they do...". Ibn Kathir speculates that Mujahid might be making an allusion to male-male anal intercourse (*liwat*), but he seems unsure of this.<sup>28</sup> In any case, Ibn Kathir does not give preference to this view, which he credits to Mujahid, but rather prefers those interpretations suggesting that the verses concern early penalties for *zina* that were later superseded.<sup>29</sup>

But much contemporary discourse about the Qur'an that is aimed at the average believer tends to simplify such pre-modern interpretations, smoothing out ambiguities as well as projecting modern notions about sexuality backwards in time. For instance, in al-Sabuni's 20th-century abridged version of Ibn Kathir's commentary, Mujahid's view is no longer presented as unusual. Further, Ibn Kathir's own uncertainty about what Mujahid means is replaced by a clear assertion that it refers to "two men who commit *liwat*."<sup>30</sup> In a recent abridged version in English, the word "*liwat*," which according to pre-modern usage only indicates "anal penetration," is now misleadingly translated as "homosexuality" itself.<sup>31</sup>

For its part, the *hadith* literature shows that the first few generations of Muslims did not agree on the punishment for *liwat*. The second caliph, 'Umar ibn al-Khattab (r. 634-644) is reported to have dealt with one man by simply instructing some of the young men of the Quraysh tribe not to sit with him. Other early figures are said to have advocated flogging (for the unmarried), or execution.<sup>32</sup>

Despite this ambiguity, jurists denounced same-sex sexual and intimate acts as sinful. However, the main focus of their rulings on this matter was one particular sexual act: male-male anal penetration. Women's same-sex sexual acts receive relatively little attention in pre-modern legal texts. While some jurists prescribed flogging as the punishment for women, others do not discuss this issue at all.<sup>33</sup> Women's same-sex sexual acts apparently were not perceived by most jurists as posing a grave threat to the social order. Since no male penetration was involved, there would be no risk of an "illegitimate" pregnancy or other socially disruptive consequences.<sup>34</sup> But jurists may also have felt that this issue did not require detailed regulation because, in their imagined ideal world, women's personal and sexual lives were supposed to be under the supervision and control of their male guardians, husbands, or masters.

Twelver Shi'i jurists appear to have held the most severe view on male-male anal penetration, ruling that men who engage in this act are to be executed, whether they are single

<sup>27</sup> e.g. al-Jassas 1986, 2:105-8; Ibn al-'Arabi 1972, 1:354-61.

<sup>28</sup> Interestingly, Tabari interprets this reported view of Mujahid's as a reference to men committing fornication or adultery (Tabari 2001, 4:356).

<sup>29</sup> Ibn Kathir 2002, 2:141.

<sup>30</sup> al-Sabuni 1981, 1:366-67.

<sup>31</sup> Ar-Rafa'i 1999, 4:195.

<sup>32</sup> 'Abd al-Razzaq 1999, 2:194.

<sup>33</sup> Adang 2003, 25-26, 28.

<sup>34</sup> Amer 2009, 222.

or married. Also, they held that men who engage in other types of same-sex sexual acts were to receive one hundred lashes — and be executed on their fourth offense.<sup>35</sup>

The eponymous founders of the Shafi'i, Maliki, and Hanafi Sunni legal schools did not agree on the penalty for male-male anal intercourse. Al-Shafi'i (d. 820) apparently argued that it should be treated like fornication or adultery. Thus, free unmarried men are to receive a hundred lashes and banishment for one year, while married men are to be stoned to death. Malik (d. 795) is said to have taught that the penalty is stoning, regardless of marital status. However, Abu Hanifa (d. 767) is reported to have held that the punishments for this act are not set, but rather that the judge should use his discretion in imposing a penalty. Those who held this latter view pointed to a *hadith* relating that Muhammad stated a person may be executed for only three acts — adultery, apostasy, and murder.<sup>36</sup>

The 11th-century Zahiri jurist Ibn Hazm vigorously argued against the view that those found guilty of male-male anal intercourse should be executed, asserting that they ought to be penalized according to the discretion of the judge (not exceeding 10 lashes), and an unspecified period of imprisonment.<sup>37</sup> Significantly, Ibn Hazm also takes issue with the predominant interpretations of the Lot story, asserting that Lot's people were punished for their unbelief as well as their sexual activities. He also argues that none of the *hadith* that call for the execution of those guilty of this act are authentic.<sup>38</sup>

Despite these rulings, we have relatively little knowledge about how these legal debates affected the lives of actual people in pre-modern times. Prescribing a punishment in a ruling is not the same thing as passing judgment in a particular case. For instance, jurists who argued that male-male anal intercourse should be penalized in the same way as adultery and fornication expected the case to be decided on the same evidentiary standard. Four morally upstanding free Muslim male witnesses must testify in court that they had seen the act of penetration itself.<sup>39</sup> Jurists were well aware that the evidentiary standard is next to impossible to reach. In these cases, the punishment stands as a deterrent to what they understood to be a threat to the social order. If men conduct such interactions with discretion, the social order would be maintained. Kecia Ali has aptly characterized this attitude as one of “don't ask, don't tell.”<sup>40</sup>

Contrary to what we might expect, the opposition of Abu Hanifa and Ibn Hazm to execution as an appropriate penalty for male-male anal intercourse appears to stem from a desire to make it more (rather than less) possible for courts to punish offenders. By making the penalty subject to the judge's discretion, they ensured that a lower, more practical evidentiary standard would need to be met.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>35</sup> El-Rouayheb 2005, 121.

<sup>36</sup> al-Jassas 1986, 3:262-263.

<sup>37</sup> Adang 2003, 22.

<sup>38</sup> Adang 2003, 20-21.

<sup>39</sup> Sunni jurists held that other intimate acts, such as fondling or intercrural intercourse, merited discretionary chastisement, but were not to be punished like a case of male-male anal intercourse (El-Rouayheb 2005, 137).

<sup>40</sup> Ali 2008, 85.

<sup>41</sup> Adang 2003, 21.

Some pre-modern rulers did not elect to deal with sexual infractions in accordance with any of these rulings outlined above. For instance, in the Ottoman Empire during the 16th century, most sexual offenses involving consenting adults, including male-male anal intercourse, were punished with fines, and women's same-sex sexual acts were not officially penalized.<sup>42</sup>

Despite their rulings that severe punishments should be imposed for male-male anal intercourse, pre-modern jurists did not necessarily take a negative attitude to poetry and literature with homoerotic themes. In his study of attitudes to male same-sex desires in the eastern Mediterranean from the 16th to the 19th centuries, Khaled El-Rouayheb finds that while some religious scholars worried that homoerotic poetry might tempt men to sin, many others ruled that writing, reciting, or listening to the recitation of such poetry is allowed. In fact, some religious scholars wrote poetry of this type themselves.<sup>43</sup> Sufi poetry with homoerotic themes was composed in all of the major literary languages used by medieval Muslims. The love story of Sultan Mahmud of Ghazna and his slave Ayaz is only one example.<sup>44</sup>

## Conclusion

The dominant ways of thinking about gender and sexual desires and acts discussed in this article — as well as ways of thinking about the individual, family, and marriage — began to change significantly among educated urban elites in a number of Muslim societies during the 19th century for a number of complex social, political and economic reasons. Educated urban elites adopted the two-sex model, as well as other new ideas, such as gender complementarity and companionate marriage. Homoerotic feelings and desires were increasingly seen as disreputable and shameful, and romantic love was re-envisioned as a purely heterosexual experience.

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<sup>42</sup> Ze'evi 2006, 60-63.

<sup>43</sup> El-Rouayheb 2005, 141-45.

<sup>44</sup> Kugle 2001 30-37.

# Contemporary Developments within Muslim Societies and Communities regarding LGBT Identity and Rights

by Munir Shaikh

## Introduction

Speaking at a forum for world leaders at Columbia University on September 24, 2007, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was challenged regarding the treatment of homosexuals in Iran. His response to a question about the death penalty being applied to gays was, “In Iran we don’t have homosexuals like in your country.” According to Amnesty International, homosexuals were among 200 individuals who had been executed that year in the country. Despite the audience’s incredulity and derision, he continued, “In Iran we do not have this phenomenon, I don’t know who has told you that we have it.”<sup>1</sup>

It is possible to appreciate this incident in terms of the Platonic “problem of universals.” As Professor John Boswell puts it: “Do categories exist because humans recognize real distinctions in the world around them, or are categories arbitrary conventions, simply names for things that have categorical force because humans agree to use them in certain ways?”<sup>2</sup> For Ahmadinejad, “homosexual” is not a preexisting category, but something (Western) culture has constructed.

This is understandable in light of the fact that in Muslim societies, there is no linguistic foundation for the term “homosexual.”<sup>3</sup> Along the same lines, there are no “heterosexuals.” Consequently, such identities do not exist in the prevailing social structure in majority-Muslim nations. This is not to say that there is no male-male or female-female sexuality among Muslims today. Same sex intimacy has been endemic in Muslim cultures for the past 14 centuries; that is to say it has been part of the social reality and sexual culture of various peoples since late antiquity, when their ancestors entered the fold of Islam and became subject to its moral and legal regimes. Nevertheless, the growing panoply of terms signifying sex and gender-based identities — lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, cisgender, etc. — are clearly modern and remain largely absent from current Muslim discourses, just as they were once absent in the European and North American contexts.<sup>4</sup>

## Normative Theological Perspectives

As noted elsewhere in this report, mainstream Islam, akin to traditional Judaism and

<sup>1</sup> “Ahmadinejad: No Gays, No Oppression of Women in Iran.” ABC News. Web. 24 Sept. 2007.

<http://abcnews.go.com/US/story?id=3642673>

<sup>2</sup> John Boswell, “Revolutions, Universals, and Sexual Categories,” in *Same Sex: Debating the Ethics, Science and Culture of Homosexuality*, ed. John Corvino (Rowman & Littlefield, 1997), 186.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Avery, “Islam,” in *Socio-Legal Control of Homosexuality: A Multi-Nation Comparison*, ed. Donald J. West and Richard Green (New York: Plenum Press, 1997), 110.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

Christianity, considers heterosexual intercourse between lawful partners to be normative, and scriptural sources uniformly reinforce this position. A limited number of passages in the Qur'an condemn sexual relations between men and, by extension according to most interpreters, between women. Traditional exegetes treat the account of Lot's people, the context for the disapproval, as a straightforward indicator of the sinfulness of homosexual acts, which exceed the bounds set by God.<sup>5</sup> A number of *hadith* (sayings attributed to the prophet Muhammad) stipulate punishments for both "active" and "passive" participants in anal intercourse.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, scholars of Islamic law have generally regarded homosexual activity to be not only sinful, but also criminal behavior, warranting penalties from the state. However, numerous legal principles that shaped judicial practice (such as the status of private versus public violations, standards of witnessing, the preference for leniency, etc.) limited the extent of prosecution.<sup>7</sup> To the present day, the legal discourse centers on the status of sexual acts in themselves, and reflects a concern for public morality, but does not address concepts such as biological sex versus gender identity, or the possibility of love and marital commitment between members of the same biological sex. Individuals engaged in homosexual acts are encouraged to repent and, given the predominance of honor-shame culture as part of the patriarchal societies of the Mediterranean and Asian regions, Muslims continue to reinscribe heteronormative identity and behavior with recourse to the mainstream teachings of their faith.<sup>8</sup>

### **Sex and Sexuality in Muslim History**

As discussed elsewhere in this report, the history of sexuality among Muslims is far more complex and dynamic than normative statements would lead one to believe. As Huda Lutfi observes, "Prescriptive religious literature should not necessarily be taken as a reflection of reality."<sup>9</sup>

In Islamic tradition, the sins of Lot's people became proverbial, and provided the basis for the Arabic word for homosexual relations, *liwat*.<sup>10</sup> Yet early on, Muslim societies accommodated various gendered realities and sexual practices. There are *hadiths* indicating the existence of *mukhannaths* (who would be called transgender women in today's parlance) in the Prophet Muhammad's community.<sup>11</sup> According to the well-known *hadith* collector An-Nawawi, if such individuals exhibited intrinsic female characteristics, then they were free to fraternize

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<sup>5</sup> Khalid Duran, "Homosexuality and Islam," in *Homosexuality and World Religion*, ed. Arlene Swidler (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1993), 181.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 182.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 183.

<sup>8</sup> Vasiliki Limberis, "The Eyes Infected by Evil: Basil of Caesarea's Homily, *On Envy*," in *Harvard Theological Review*, 84:2 (1991), 169.

<sup>9</sup> Huda Lutfi, "Manners and Customs of Fourteenth-Century Cairene Women: Female Anarchy versus Male Shar'i Order in Muslim Prescriptive Treatises," in *Women in Middle Eastern History: Shifting Boundaries in Sex and Gender*, ed. Nikki Keddie and Beth Baron (Yale University Press, 1991), 102.

<sup>10</sup> Charles Pellat, "Liwat," in *Sexuality and Eroticism Among Males in Moslem Societies*, ed. Arno Schmitt and Jehoeda Sofer (Routledge, 1992), 151.

<sup>11</sup> Joseph Norment Bell, *Love Theory in Later Hanbalite Islam* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1979), 36.

with women.<sup>12</sup> Islamic legal scholars developed a body of opinions on the rights of intersex individuals with respect to marriage and sexual relations, as well as the appropriate placement in congregational prayer (intermediate between the rows of men and women).<sup>13</sup>

Hellenistic and Persian proclivities of adult males for sex with boys continued in medieval Muslim cultures, and remain a part of the sexual practices in some countries today.<sup>14</sup> Homoerotic themes are quite evident in the Muslim literary tradition, reflecting this reality. Such sexual couplings were not always thought of as “homosexual,” but rather as sex between individuals functioning in male and female gender roles. The androgenous nature of young boys, combined with female segregation in Muslim cultures, facilitated the male-male sexual outlet.<sup>15</sup>

Such liaisons have been typically overlooked in Muslim cultures, so long as males eventually gave up same sex intercourse for marriage and procreation. In some societies, even after marriage, extra-marital sex with males (but not females) might be tolerated so long as a facade of heteronormativity is maintained.<sup>16</sup>

### **Post-Colonial Context**

The status of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) issues in Muslim societies, like virtually all other social and political concerns, is colored by the impact of colonialism in Asia, Africa and the Middle East, and the ongoing cultural power of the West vis-a-vis other regions. Muslims the world over, like their compatriots belonging to other faith traditions, have contended with the impact of evolving Western social and sexual norms upon their own societies for decades. Consequently, LGBT concerns and aims are best considered with appreciation for the post-colonial climate.

Given that the developing world has evolved oppositionally vis-a-vis the West through Orientalist discourses and modernization theory, and conversely Third Worldism and Occidentalism (e.g. fear of “Westoxification”), it is difficult to develop consensus around a universal set of standards.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, most observers would say that there are limits to cultural relativism. Globalization and the emergence of a multipolar order might create opportunities for various societies to produce their own authentic approaches to addressing LGBT realities.

One of the unintended consequences of modernity is the codification of the Shari’a.<sup>18</sup> In premodern times, Islamic law was dynamic and could not be reduced to a limited set of rulings.

<sup>12</sup> Everett K. Rowson, “The Effeminate of Early Medina,” in *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 111:4 (1991), 675.

<sup>13</sup> Paula Sanders, “Gendering the Ungendered Body: Hermaphrodites in Medieval Islamic Law,” in *Women in Middle Eastern History: Shifting Boundaries in Sex and Gender*, ed. Nikki Keddie and Beth Baron (Yale University Press, 1991), 80.

<sup>14</sup> Arno Schmitt, “Different Approaches to Male-Male Sexuality/Eroticism from Morocco to Usbeksitan,” in *Sexuality and Eroticism Among Males in Moslem Societies*, ed. Arno Schmitt and Jehoeda Sofer (Routledge, 1992), 2.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>16</sup> Stephen O. Murray and Badruddin Khan, “Pakistan,” in *Socio-Legal Control of Homosexuality: A Multi-Nation Comparison*, ed. Donald J. West and Richard Green (New York: Plenum Press, 1997), 122.

<sup>17</sup> Duran, 194.

<sup>18</sup> Judith Tucker, *In the House of the Law: Gender and Islamic Law in Ottoman Syria and Palestine* (University of California Press, 1998), 12.

The scholarly tradition was treated in an open-ended fashion, and new interpretations could readily take their place alongside established views, expanding the range of solutions adopted in different societies for various needs. With the creation of the Ottoman Majalla and other official codes, the Shari'a acquired a more concrete character, and Muslim authorities have tended to treat it as a fixed body of opinions. As a result, according to Professor Kecia Ali, "those who have appointed themselves the guardians of communal orthodoxy are particularly vigilant on matters concerned with women and gender — in part because it is in these realms that the construction of Muslim identity in self-conscious opposition to a decadent West takes place."<sup>19</sup>

Since World War II, Muslims have increasingly become part of the fabric of Western societies, moving from the sociocultural margins to mainstream visibility.<sup>20</sup> Among immigrant Muslims, acculturation to Western lifestyles and habits of mind has taken several forms. Many newcomers have affirmed that western societies provide a standard of living and a framework of freedom not found in the countries of their origin. Even so, they take pride in their native cultures and seek to pass down language and ethnic traditions to the next generations, though not always with success. Many Muslims adopt a "live and let live" attitude in the public sphere, but in their communities maintain traditional Islamic viewpoints regarding the definition of marriage, appropriate levels of interaction between the sexes, and the sinfulness of fornication, extramarital sex and homosexuality. While the tenor may vary, Muslim religious leaders tend to cite homosexuality along with alcoholism and drug addiction, casual sex and pornography, racism and violence among the social ills of western societies.<sup>21</sup>

Even mainstream U.S. Muslim leaders known for their conciliatory and earnest efforts to increase mutual respect and understanding between Muslims and people of other faiths and Americans at large tend to take a consistent stand on the question of homosexuality.

As far as "Islamic"-ness is concerned, according to Shaykh Hamza Yusuf of the Zaytuna Institute, "If one considers it acceptable in Islam [to be gay], then he or she is not considered to be a Muslim by consensus of the scholars ... on this I know of no debate whatsoever."<sup>22</sup> Dr. Muzammil Siddiqi, former President of the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) and an internationally regarded scholar, has said, "Homosexuality is a moral disorder. It is a moral disease, a sin and corruption ... No person is born homosexual, just like no one is born a thief, a liar or murderer," and "People acquire these evil habits due to a lack of proper guidance and education."<sup>23</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Kecia Ali, *Sexual Ethics and Islam: Feminist Reflections on Qur'an, Hadith and Jurisprudence* (Oneworld Publications, 2006), xiii.

<sup>20</sup> "Muslim Americans: Middle Class and Mostly Mainstream." The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life. Web. 22 May 2007. [www.pewforum.org/Muslim/Muslim-Americans-Middle-Class-and-Mostly-Mainstream.aspx](http://www.pewforum.org/Muslim/Muslim-Americans-Middle-Class-and-Mostly-Mainstream.aspx)

<sup>21</sup> Muqtedar Khan, "American Muslims and the Rediscovery of America's Sacred Ground," in *Taking Religious Pluralism Seriously: Spiritual Politics on America's Sacred Ground*, ed. Barbara McGraw (Baylor University Press, 2005), 133.

<sup>22</sup> Heidi Dietrich, "To Be Gay and Muslim." Alternet. Web. 9 April 2002. <http://www.alternet.org/story/12817>

<sup>23</sup> "Islam and Homosexuality." Religioustolerance.org. Web. 16 Nov. 2002. [http://www.religioustolerance.org/hom\\_isla2.htm](http://www.religioustolerance.org/hom_isla2.htm)

Nevertheless, the question of whether people are “born this way” remains a live one in cultures throughout the globe. Increasing numbers of Muslims, like their premodern predecessors such as An-Nawawi, recognize that “the presupposition of an idealized and uniform tradition dramatically oversimplifies a complex and heterogenous intellectual and textual legacy that spans nearly a millenium and a half”<sup>24</sup> of Muslim history, as noted by Professor Kecia Ali.

At the present time, gay Muslims remain behind closed doors, “on the downlow.” LGBT Muslims seeking stable, committed relationships sometimes enter into MOCs (“marriages of convenience”) with platonic heterosexual friends in order to carry on their loving, same-sex relationships. Stephanie Coontz, a professor of history and family studies at The Evergreen State College, notes, “Heterosexuals were the upstarts who turned marriage into a voluntary love relationship rather than a mandatory economic and political institution ... Gays and lesbians simply looked at the revolution heterosexuals had wrought and noticed that with its new norms, marriage could work for them, too.”<sup>25</sup> Few Muslim gay and lesbian weddings have taken place to date, but it is likely that there will be increased efforts to make this possible.

### **International Situation**

In many Muslim nations, such as Bahrain, Qatar, and Algeria, homosexual behavior is punished with imprisonment, fines or corporal punishment. In Iran, Mauritania, Saudi Arabia, Sudan and Yemen, and in some parts of Nigeria and Somalia, homosexual activity can be punished with the death penalty (in such cases, classical burden of proof requirements are often overlooked). In Egypt, Pakistan and other countries, LGBT individuals can be prosecuted under general public morality laws. In other countries, such as Lebanon, Albania, Turkey, Jordan, Indonesia and Mali, there is no recognition of LGBT rights as such, but same sex relationships are tolerated to some extent. In Albania and Lebanon there are current efforts to legalize homosexuality and same-sex marriage.<sup>26</sup>

In India, which has a very large Muslim population, sexuality in general remains a taboo subject in government and society, but attitudes towards homosexuality have shifted. In 2009, India overturned a 150-year-old British colonial law punishing same-sex intercourse as an “unnatural offense.”<sup>27</sup> Singapore, with a multifaith population that includes Muslims, retains the same colonial law at the present time.<sup>28</sup> China, which also has a large Muslim population in certain regions and major

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<sup>24</sup> Ali, xiii.

<sup>25</sup> Stephanie Coontz, “The Heterosexual Revolution.” *New York Times*. Web. 5 July, 2005.

<http://www.stephaniecoontz.com/articles/article21.htm>

<sup>26</sup> “Albanian Gay Rights Law, Minus Marriage.” Advocate.com. Web. 5 Feb. 2010.

[http://www.advocate.com/News/Daily\\_News/2010/02/05/Albanian\\_Law\\_Drops\\_Gay\\_Marriage\\_Proposal/](http://www.advocate.com/News/Daily_News/2010/02/05/Albanian_Law_Drops_Gay_Marriage_Proposal/)

<sup>27</sup> Jyoti Thottam. “India’s Historic Ruling on Gay Rights.” Time, Inc. Web. 2 July 2009.

<http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1908406,00.html>

<sup>28</sup> Laurence Wai-Teng Leong, “Singapore,” in *Socio-Legal Control of Homosexuality: A Multi-Nation Comparison*, ed. Donald J. West and Richard Green (New York: Plenum Press, 1997), 127.

cities, has since the late 1990s adopted more tolerant criminal codes to exclude homosexuality from punishment, and in 2001 removed homosexuality from its classification of mental disorders.<sup>29</sup>

Iran has been at the forefront of Muslim-majority countries allowing transsexuals to change their sex to match their gender so that they can enter heterosexual relationships. This position was first articulated by Ayatollah Khomeini and has the support of current leader Ayatollah Khamenei and many other Iranian clerics. The state typically pays a portion of the cost for a sex-change operation.<sup>30</sup>

It is clichéd but true that the internet has made new forms of communication and community building possible in the last decade. Aided by websites, online discussion forums, email listserves, and media resources, advocacy organizations have sprung up in a number of Muslim countries as well as in Western nations to educate and empower people of Arab and Muslim backgrounds who identify as LGBT. Many of them are discussed below.

### **LGBT Rights Organizations in Muslim-Majority Nations**

Gay Muslim organizations exist in Lebanon, Palestine, Syria, Turkey, Indonesia, Malaysia and a few other countries. A section of the portal website [www.al-bab.com](http://www.al-bab.com) (alluding to the Bab al-Yemen, the famous gateway leading into the old city of Sana'a) provides a periodically updated list of gay and lesbian organizations and resources, including approximately 20 blogs. The website [www.GayMiddleeast.com](http://www.GayMiddleeast.com) serves as an Arabic and English news blog reporting on legislation and incidents in Arab countries and Israel that are relevant to LGBT communities. Similarly, [www.GayMaroc.net](http://www.GayMaroc.net) provides news and information to Francophone audiences.

The Arab Lesbian Women & Allies Network (Alwaan), [www.alwaandykes.com](http://www.alwaandykes.com) is an online network for Arab lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transpersons and those who are interested in building bridges with the LGBT Arab community.

The Lebanese organization Helem, [www.helem.net](http://www.helem.net), founded in 2004, is in its own words “the first legal, above-ground LGBT organization in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.” It seeks to safeguard LGBT and other persons with non-conforming sexuality or gender identity in Lebanon from violations of civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights. Helem upholds the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Its primary goal is the annulment of article 534 of the Lebanese Penal Code, which punishes “unnatural sexual intercourse.” Helem is also concerned about AIDS awareness, church-state separation, fair wages, treatment of immigrants, and the decriminalization of sex workers and drug users, and policies regarding health and social services. Helem is presently launching an online “Homophobia Monitor” tool to collect information

<sup>29</sup> “Chinese Society More Tolerant of Homosexuality.” China.org.cn. Web. 31 Oct. 2001.  
<http://www.china.org.cn/english/2001/Oct/21394.htm>

<sup>30</sup> Frances Harrison. “Iran’s sex-change operations.” BBC News. Web. 5 Jan. 2005.  
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/newsnight/4115535.stm>

on the conditions of the homosexual community in Arab societies. The organization has published a book titled *Homophobia: Views and Positions*, the first of its kind in Arabic in the region. It contains contributions from some of Lebanon's most gifted writers, intellectuals and activists, sparking much needed conversation about the violence that LGBT individuals face.

Meem, [www.meemgroup.org](http://www.meemgroup.org), is a community of and for LBTQ women in Lebanon. The term *mar'a al-mithliya* ("women oriented toward the same sex") is often used for lesbians in Arab culture, and the initial letter "meem" in "mithliya" gives the organization its name. The group's logo combines the Arabic letter with the Venus symbol used to signify the female.

In the Palestinian territories, around 2005, alQaws ([www.alqaws.org](http://www.alqaws.org)) for Sexual & Gender Diversity in Palestinian Society and Aswat Palestinian Gay Women emerged. Aswat Group consists of 20 women so far ([www.aswatgroup.org](http://www.aswatgroup.org)).

The Queer Falafels List is an email listserve for Arab and Israeli gay activists to discuss political and cultural issues related to the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Barra Magazine is the first quarterly Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersexed and Queer magazine in the Arab world (<http://helem.net/taxonomy/term/11+18+12+13+15+16>).

In Malaysia, since August 2008, the *Seksualiti Merdeka* ("Independent Sexuality") annual festival has been organized to coincide with the national Independence Day. Attended by roughly 500 people, the event features talks, performances, screenings, workshops, and forums to promote sexuality rights as part of human rights advocacy, to empower marginalized individuals and communities, and to educate the public.<sup>31</sup>

In Indonesia, Lambda Indonesia, set up in 1982, was the first gay rights interest group to publicly proclaim itself. Lambda was reconstituted as GAYa Nusantara in 1987, the biggest gay group in the country, raising public awareness on sexual health and providing 24-hour telephone counseling services ([www.gayanusantara.or.id](http://www.gayanusantara.or.id)). The first lesbian group was formed in Jakarta in the 1980s. It was called Perlesin, short for Persatuan Lesbian Indonesia (Indonesian Lesbian Union). Perlesin failed to reach the wider community and folded. When GAYa Nusantara started, lesbian groups got involved. The establishment of the Asian Lesbian Network (ALN) in 1989 inspired Indonesian lesbians to become more political, leading three participants to set up the lesbian network Chandra Kirana in January 1993. Chandra Kirana published its own bulletin, feeling that the gay men's movement did not provide enough space for female concerns. In 2000, the group published a book of short stories entitled *Lines*, which reveals lesbian life in Indonesia ("lines" is a colloquial term for lesbians). Chandra Kirana has sought to avoid being co-opted as "the Second Sex" by joining the gay men's movement, yet also feels out of place in the general Indonesian women's movement. Furthermore, even the lesbian community at large may not

<sup>31</sup> "Seksualiti Merdeka." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, Inc. Web. Accessed 15 March 2011; article updated 30 Dec. 2010, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seksualiti\\_Merdeka](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seksualiti_Merdeka).

be accommodating enough to meet the needs of lesbian Muslim women who wish to remain committed to their religion.<sup>32</sup>

As LGBT persons have become more visible in the Indonesian public square, push back by social conservatives has increased. A conference organized by the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA) and approved by local authorities to be held in March 2010 in East Java was cut short due to protests by groups called the *Islamic Defender Front* (FPI) and the *Islamic Communication Forum* (FUI). A spokesperson stated that “gays and lesbians are moral terrorists” who should be banned from the East Java province. Attended by 200 participants, the conference was the first such event in Indonesia and the fourth in Asia. A month later, FPI stormed a civil rights training program intended for transgender individuals in West Java. The program was organized by the National Commission for Human Rights, but dozens of FPI members forced their way past police into the room, causing participants to flee.<sup>33</sup>

In September 2010, Jakarta hosted the ninth annual Q! Film Festival, hailed as the biggest in Asia and the only one in the Muslim world ([www.q-munity.org](http://www.q-munity.org)). The event showcased 150 films from more than 20 countries. While not publicized in the mainstream local media, activity on social networking sites showed significant awareness. The free screenings were held in private clubs and foreign cultural centers such as the Goethe Institute, Erasmus Huis, Central Culture Francaise and the Japan Foundation, giving the event some international protection and cosmopolitan framing.<sup>34</sup>

While technically legal in Indonesia, homosexuality remains a taboo, especially among the 80 percent of the population that is Muslim. Lawmakers in Aceh province voted last year to make homosexuality punishable by up to 100 lashes under local religious by-laws, but the provincial government has refused to approve such legislation. Unlike neighboring Malaysia, Indonesia’s criminal laws do not prohibit private, consensual, non-commercial homosexual relations. A proposed national bill to criminalize homosexuality failed to be enacted in 2003 and no subsequent bill has been introduced.<sup>35</sup>

### **LGBT Rights Organizations in Western Countries**

In North America, among the earliest organizations working for recognition of gay Muslims is Al Fatiha, [www.al-fatiha.org](http://www.al-fatiha.org). Founded by Faisal Alam in 1997 as a listserve, about 40 participants representing 13 ethnicities and five nationalities met for a retreat in Boston the next year. The group now claims 700 members among eight national chapters. It has affiliate

<sup>32</sup> Bunga Jeumpa and Ulil. “Quo Vadis, Lesbians?” *Inside Indonesia*. Web. April 2001.

<http://www.insideindonesia.org/edition-66/quo-vadis-lesbians>

<sup>33</sup> Matthew Hariyadi. “Java, Conference of gays and lesbians blocked by Islamic extremists.” AsiaNews.it. Web. 27 March 2010.

<http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Java,-Conference-of-gays-and-lesbians-blocked-by-Islamic-extremists-18002.html>

<sup>34</sup> Arlina Arshad. “Gay Film Festival Opens in Indonesia.” The Jakarta Globe. Web. 24 Sept. 2010.

<http://www.thejakartaglobe.com/home/gay-film-festival-opens-in-indonesia/397878>

<sup>35</sup> “Aceh law threatens death by stoning for adultery.” Guardian.co.uk. Web. 14 Sept. 2009.

organizations in Canada, Great Britain and South Africa, such as Al Fatiha UK, which evolved into Imaan (meaning “faith” in Arabic), [www.imaan.org.uk](http://www.imaan.org.uk). Alam estimates that 95 percent of members had stopped practicing Islam before joining the organization, and “they come to Al-Fatiha trying to find a way back.”<sup>36</sup> In 2001, Al Fatiha organized a conference in San Francisco attended by about 250 gay Muslims.

These organizations provide support to LGBT Muslim people and their families, and offer a safe space to address their common concerns. Imaan acknowledges that the desire to reconcile Islam with sexuality arose among gay Muslims in response to the growth of a gay culture in England.<sup>37</sup> Imaan has about 300 members who affirm that they are both gay and Muslim, an oxymoron for most of their coreligionists. In 2009 Al Fatiha embarked on a redesign of its website, and launched an online survey, apparently the first of its kind, to assess Muslims who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer, or questioning their gender identity and sexual orientation (LGBTIQQ). The results of this survey do not appear to have been published as of yet, and the website does not appear to be actively maintained.

In the UK the Naz Project London (NPL), [www.naz.org.uk](http://www.naz.org.uk), is the oldest and most broadly based BME (Black and Minority Ethnic) charity in London addressing the sexual health and HIV/AIDS needs of its communities. It mainly provides support services to South Asians (including Bangladeshis, Indians, and Pakistanis), Muslims (including Middle Easterners and Africans), Horn of Africans (Eritreans, Ethiopians, and Somalis), Portuguese speakers (including Angolans, Brazilians, Mozambicans, and Portuguese), and Spanish speakers (mainly Latin American).

Fazal Mahmood runs a UK support group for South Asian and Middle Eastern gay men called Himat ([www.positiveeast.org.uk](http://www.positiveeast.org.uk)), which means “strength” in Urdu. He has about 150 people on his mailing list. Of those seeking help, “about 80 percent ... have been coerced into marriage or are being forced into marriage” to “cure” them of what is considered by family members to be a psychological disorder.<sup>38</sup>

The Safra Project, [www.safraproject.org](http://www.safraproject.org), established in 2001 by and for Muslim LBT women, is also based in England. The word Safra is connected to words for “journey” and “discovery” in Arabic, Farsi and Urdu. The group combats *compounded* prejudices based on sexual orientation, gender identity, gender, religion, race, culture and immigration status that such women experience. The project has published an excellent online report titled *Sexuality, Gender and Islam* ([www.safraproject.org/sgi-intro.htm](http://www.safraproject.org/sgi-intro.htm)) that summarizes traditional and revisionist Muslim perspectives on sexuality issues.

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<sup>36</sup> Andrew Norman. “Closet Jihad.” Lansing City Pulse. Web. 16 Dec. 2009.

<http://www.lansingcitypulse.com/lansing/article-3790-closet-jihad.html>

<sup>37</sup> “About Imaan.” Imaan LGBTQI Muslim Support Group. Web. Accessed 15 March 2011.

<http://www.imaan.org.uk/about/about.htm>

<sup>38</sup> Poonam Taneja. “Gay Muslims made homeless by family violence.” BBC News. Web. 11 Jan. 2010.

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8446458.stm>

In France, Le Refuge ([www.le-refuge.org](http://www.le-refuge.org)) has cared for about 200 young people since its founding in 2003. According to founder Nicolas Noguier, nearly 70 percent of the people living in the facility are young men from Muslim families.<sup>39</sup>

The website Queer Jihad, [www.well.com/user/queerjhd](http://www.well.com/user/queerjhd), appropriates orthodox markers to undergird its efforts to encourage gay, lesbian and queer Muslims to “remain true to their Creator, to grapple with the issues, to come to terms with who they are in whatever manner and fashion they are capable of doing so.” The jihad, or struggle, in question is “first ... to accept ourselves as being exactly the way Allah has created us to be; and secondly, the struggle for understanding among Muslims in general.” The founder of the site is Sulayman X, a convert to Islam who has since left the faith due to his inability to reconcile traditional Islamic teaching on homosexuality with his own reality of being a gay man.<sup>40</sup>

The Gay and Lesbian Arabic Society (GLAS), [www.glas.org](http://www.glas.org), is a U.S.-based networking organization established in 1988, with chapters in Los Angeles, New York, Egypt and Lebanon. GLAS considers itself part of the global gay and lesbian movement. It promotes positive images of gays and lesbians in Arab communities, and likewise works to counter negative images of Arabs within the LGBT communities. Each chapter has a YahooGroups listserve, and the organization runs a website and news blog called Ahbab ([www.glas.org/ahbab](http://www.glas.org/ahbab)), meaning “friends” or “beloved.” Lazeeza, [www.glas.org/lazeeza.html](http://www.glas.org/lazeeza.html), is a project of GLAS that provides Arab lesbians a space to share articles, poetry and support.

Bint el Nas (“Daughter of the People,” a term used in Arab culture to describe a woman of good standing), [www.bintelnas.org](http://www.bintelnas.org), is a blog and online magazine project of the Mujadarra Grrls, sponsored by the San Francisco-based Queer Cultural Center, [www.queerculturalcenter.org](http://www.queerculturalcenter.org). The group is committed to “optimistic subversion,” believing that any act of creation in the face of oppression is a hopeful act. It operates a mailing list and a personals section.

LGBT individuals of Iranian descent have also started to expand their audience. In early 2009, Saghi Garahaman, the CEO of the Iranian Queer Organization (IRQO) of Toronto partnered with Farid Haeri Nezhad, the director of the Dutch nonprofit website and satellite Radio Zamaaneh, [www.zamaaneh.com](http://www.zamaaneh.com), to provide Iranian queers a platform from which their voices could be heard. The goal was to educate the general public about the realities of their lives within a framework of human and civil rights. It is called the Queer Section (DegarBash Page), [www.zamaaneh.com/degarbash](http://www.zamaaneh.com/degarbash).<sup>41</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Annika Sartor. “French ‘Refuge’ Helps Muslim Gays.” Spiegel. Web. 10 March 2011.

<http://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/0,1518,749921,00.html>

<sup>40</sup> “The New and Improved Sulayman X.” Queer Jihad. Web. 10 Jan. 2003.

<http://www.well.com/user/queerjhd/sxnonviolentlyhappy.htm>

<sup>41</sup> Dan Littauer. “Iranian queers voices heard - radio Zamaaneh!” GayMiddleEast.com. Web. 30 Nov. 2010.

<http://www.gaymiddleeast.com/news/news%20239.htm>

Homan is a Los Angeles-based support group for gay Iranians, and since 1997 Satrang (“multicolored”), [www.satrang.org](http://www.satrang.org), has provided support for LGBT and questioning South Asians in Los Angeles.

U.S. based gay Muslim activists are currently planning a retreat with the theme Al-Jama’ah (“community”) for about 60 persons outside of Philadelphia in late May 2011. The retreat’s website states that the last significant LGBT Muslim gathering took place in September 2005 ([www.lgbtmuslimretreat.com](http://www.lgbtmuslimretreat.com)).

### **Contemporary Shifts**

According to various studies and surveys conducted in the last half-century, gays and lesbians may comprise up to 10 percent of the general U.S. population, though this is contested and some argue that the percentage is less than 5 percent.<sup>42</sup> It is commonplace to carry these proportions across various demographics. Along these lines, LGBT Muslims constitute a very small but tangible segment of Muslim communities worldwide. Yet, Muslims who do not identify as LGBT nevertheless find themselves addressing the emergence of LGBT identity and politics among some of their coreligionists.

Although there is hardly any meaningful conversation about LGBT identity and issues on the part of the present Muslim leadership, significant shifts in attitudes are emerging, particularly within western Muslim communities. Some Muslims unequivocally condemn homosexuality, while others, being acculturated to gay rights discourses and “progressive” Muslim discourses, have become sympathetic to LGBT concerns. Some Muslims consider recognition of homosexuality and gay marriage as a threat to traditional marriage, while others do not.

Divergent viewpoints are evident on sites such as Wajahat Ali’s Goatmilk blog ([www.goatmilkblog.com](http://www.goatmilkblog.com)) and opinion sites such as AltMuslim ([www.altmuslim.com](http://www.altmuslim.com)) and AltMuslimah ([www.altmuslimah.com](http://www.altmuslimah.com)). Such online discussion forums are vastly different from the conventional Islamic information sites that tend simply to cite standard historical legal opinions and proscriptions.<sup>43</sup>

The November 2008 ballot measures to prohibit same sex marriage in California, Arizona and Florida were the subject of debate on several Muslim blogs and sites.<sup>44</sup> Opponents of the measures stressed the importance of self-determination and freedom of conscience as a basis for accepting gay marriage for those who seek it. Among leading advocacy organizations, the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) supported the measures, whereas the Muslim

<sup>42</sup> “Composite U.S. Demographics.” Adherents.com. Web. 13 March 2001. [http://www.adherents.com/adh\\_dem.html](http://www.adherents.com/adh_dem.html)

<sup>43</sup> “Homosexuality in Islam.” SunniPath.com. Web. 19 Sept. 2005. [http://qa.sunnipath.com/issue\\_view.asp?HD=1&ID=5130&CATE=239](http://qa.sunnipath.com/issue_view.asp?HD=1&ID=5130&CATE=239)

<sup>44</sup> Robert Salaam. “My thoughts on Proposition 8 results.” The American Muslim. Web. 6 Nov. 2008. <http://www.theamericanmuslim.net/blog/?p=605>

Public Affairs Council (MPAC) took a neutral position.<sup>45</sup> Many Muslims voted in favor of these measures, but others did not. Respected Muslim academic and scholar Dr. Sherman Jackson argued that since the Shari'a applies to Muslims, they should not be involved in regulating the sexual mores of others. He noted that early Muslim legal scholars did not prohibit Zoroastrian marriage practices among the subjects of the Muslim empire, even though the practices were abhorrent from an Islamic perspective.<sup>46</sup>

In this regard, too, then, Muslims are not a monolithic group. In the UK, for example, a Gallup poll showed that almost zero Muslims believed homosexuality to be “morally acceptable,” compared with 35 percent of French Muslims.<sup>47</sup> In recent years, new Muslim associations have arisen that are not exclusively focused on LGBT issues, but recognize and are highly supportive of LGBT Muslims. The Progressive Muslim Union of North America (PMU) was a liberal Islamic organization launched in 2004 in New York, but it was disbanded in December 2006. In May 2007, the Los Angeles-based Muslims for Progressive Values, [www.mpvusa.org](http://www.mpvusa.org), was launched with the support of several PMU founders and members. The organization considers recognition of LGBT self-determination to be a priority. For the past two years in Toronto, the el-Tawhid Juma Circle has been a gathering of straight, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals for Friday congregational worship.

Multimedia and online resources are also playing a role in shedding light on LGBT concerns.

The documentary *A Jihad for Love* (2007) — [www.ajihadforlove.com](http://www.ajihadforlove.com) — directed by Parvez Sharma, is the first film of its kind, covering LGBT experiences in 12 countries. In October 2010, the It Gets Better Project, [www.itgetsbetter.org](http://www.itgetsbetter.org), featured a video testimonial from Muslim university student Ibad Shah, which has gotten mainly positive feedback, even from some traditional Muslims ([www.itgetsbetter.org/video/entry/wj8zbtctgja](http://www.itgetsbetter.org/video/entry/wj8zbtctgja)).

On the other hand, the website GayMuslims has secured the URL to keep an “Eye on Gay Muslims” ([www.gaymuslims.org](http://www.gaymuslims.org)). Its stated purpose is to provide a principled, compassionate Islamic perspective on homosexuality.

## State of Discourse

In February 2010, France became the first country in the world to remove transgender identity from the list of mental diseases.<sup>48</sup> Thus, advocacy for the recognition of a broad range of LGBT identities and rights today is where similar advocacy for gay rights was 20-30 years ago. The discourses

<sup>45</sup> Activate 08 Voter's Guide. Muslim Public Affairs Council.

<sup>46</sup> Sherman A. Jackson, “Shari’ah, Democracy, and the Modern Nation-State: Some Reflections on Islam, Popular Rule, and Pluralism” in *Fordham International Law Journal*, 27:1 (2003), 105.

<sup>47</sup> Riazat Butt. “Muslims in Britain have zero tolerance of homosexuality, says poll.” *Guardian.co.uk*. Web. 7 May 2009. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2009/may/07/muslims-britain-france-germany-homosexuality>

<sup>48</sup> Gaëlle Faure. “In France, Transsexuals Celebrate a Small Victory.” *Time, Inc.* Web. 01 March 2010. <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1968767,00.html>

that have made these shifts possible in western societies are only now being engaged more consistently by Muslims, and it could be said that within Muslim communities, recognition of gay Muslims and public modus vivendi is likewise 2-3 decades down the line. New syntheses for understanding the issues are emerging that go beyond the discussion of the legal status of sex acts or reviewing the historical evidence for same-sex practices. Some Muslim intellectuals, scientists, activists, and community leaders are trying to approach the subject in light of new understandings of human sexuality and sociology, and in light of prevailing views of individual rights, but it will be some time before a new body of literature is produced that may generate wider acceptance of LGBT persons.<sup>49</sup>

Unfortunately, such developments are freighted with undertones of post-colonial Western hegemony. The LGBT cause is perceived by many to be simply another form of cultural imperialism, not a matter of human rights.<sup>50</sup> Viewed through this prism, LGBT concerns serve as a focal point for condemnation of the West in some circles. LGBT rights also become a site for principled opposition to western universalism. On March 22, 2011, 85 countries at the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva issued a Joint Statement entitled “Ending Acts of Violence and Related Human Rights Violations Based On Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (SOGI).” Twenty countries joined this statement that were not signatory to prior statements in 2006 or 2008. Support for this platform has steadily increased in many regions of the world, with 21 signatories from the Western Hemisphere, 43 from Europe, five from Africa, and 16 from the Asia/Pacific region. However, homosexuality remains punishable in at least 85 countries. An alternative statement, supported by 57 nations, was read in the General Assembly by the Syrian representative. The statement, led by the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) and including non-member states, rejects the idea that sexual orientation is genetically determined and argues that the SOGI declaration would undermine the international framework of human rights, by facilitating, for example, the social normalization of pedophilia and other deplorable acts. The statement also contends that religious freedom would come under duress as faith convictions about homosexuality could be criminalized within the international order.<sup>51</sup>

As individuals in majority Muslim countries and in other countries that do not officially recognize LGBT identities become more self-aware, they are likely to seek greater affirmation from fellow citizens. However, for the foreseeable future, it is likely that these countries at most will follow China’s lead in adopting a policy described as the “three nos”: no approval, no disapproval, and no promotion.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>49</sup> “Sexuality, Gender and Islam – Bibliography” Safra Project. Web. Accessed 15 March 2011.

[http://www.safraproject.org/bibliography\\_sgib.htm](http://www.safraproject.org/bibliography_sgib.htm)

<sup>50</sup> Samar Habib, ed. *Islam and Homosexuality, Volume 1* (Greenwood Publishing, 2010), xix.

<sup>51</sup> Dan Littauer. “UN: End Violence Based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity.” GayMiddleEast.com. Web. 23 March 2011. <http://gaymiddleeast.com/news/news%20280.htm>

<sup>52</sup> Asa Butcher, “Is there gay pride or prejudice in China?” Radio86.com. Web. 17 Jan. 2011.

<http://en.radio86.com/lifestyle-china/there-gay-pride-or-prejudice-china>

In Western societies, Muslims may develop their own nuanced rapprochement with the LGBT community, under the rubric of pluralism and civil rights if not religious reimagining. It is notable that the two Muslims in the U.S. Congress, Reps. Keith Ellison of Minnesota and André Carson of Indiana, are members of the LGBT Equality Caucus.<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, the Council on American-Islamic Relations was among mainstream Muslim organizations that supported the 2009 hate crimes bill that expands federal law to include crimes based on a person's sexual orientation or gender identity.<sup>54</sup>

LGBT Muslims will become more visible and vocal in the coming years. Their struggle is two-fold: overcoming a type of homophobia among coreligionists that is ironically more a product of modernity than of Islamic civilization, and overcoming Islamophobia within the broader gay community. In fact, LGBT Muslims are in a position to shed light on the shared DNA of Islamophobic and homophobic discourses that continue to animate the public square, and eventually help overcome them.

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<sup>53</sup> Norman, op. cit.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

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## Appendix A — Survey Results

### Introduction

This survey was conducted by Intersections International as part of the Muslim LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender) Inclusion project. Key individuals from Muslim communities across the United States were approached and invited to attend convenings. As part of the program at the convenings, participants were asked to complete the survey. Individuals who were not able to attend the convenings were sent an online survey to complete.

A total of 61 surveys were returned and tabulated, representing a 78.2 percent response rate from the 78 surveys sent out. Out of the 61 respondents, 75.4 percent attended one of the six convenings. The remaining 24.6 percent of the responses were from an online survey sent through several emails. The survey consists of 25 questions broken into three sections: Demographics, Religion and Issues.

### Demographics

#### Q.1 Age:

15 to 19 years	1.9%
20 to 24	13.2%
25 to 29	9.4%
30 to 34	18.9%
35 to 39	11.3%
40 to 44	13.2%
45 to 49	15.1%
50 to 54	3.8%
55 to 59	1.9%
60 to 64	7.5%
65 and over	3.8%

#### Q.2 Gender:

<u>38.3%</u> Male
<u>61.7%</u> Female

Q.3 What is your race or ethnicity? Are you white, black, Asian or something else?

<u>21.7%</u>	White	
<u>13.3%</u>	Black	
<u>25.0%</u>	Asian	
<u>40.0%</u>	Something else:	
	African Arab	4.2%
	Afro-Caribbean	4.2%
	Arab	12.5%
	Arab American	12.5%
	Hispanic	4.2%
	Latina	4.2%
	Lebanese/Arab	4.2%
	Middle Eastern	20.8%
	Middle Eastern and Hispanic	4.2%
	Persian	4.2%
	South Asian	12.5%
	South Asian (Bangladeshi)	4.2%
	South Asian Indian	4.2%
	West Indian	4.2%

Q.4a What is the last grade or class that you completed in school?

<u>0.0%</u>	Did not finish high school
<u>0.0%</u>	High school graduate
<u>0.0%</u>	Trade or technical school
<u>13.3%</u>	Some college education
<u>26.7%</u>	College graduate
60.0%	Post-graduate (includes law, business and medical school)

Q.4b In general, would you describe your political views as ...

<u>0.0%</u>	Very conservative
<u>8.5%</u>	Conservative
<u>32.2%</u>	Moderate
<u>32.2%</u>	Liberal
<u>27.1%</u>	Very liberal

Q.5a In what country do you currently live?

United States	96.7%
Canada	3.3%

Q.5b In what country were you born?

United States	55.9%
Afghanistan	1.7%
Bangladesh	1.7%
Canada	1.7%
Egypt	3.4%
India	10.2%
Iran	3.4%
Iraq	1.7%

Lebanon	6.8%
Malaysia	1.7%
Pakistan	5.1%
Sudan	1.7%
Trinidad and Tobago	1.7%
Turkey	1.7%
Yemen	1.7%

Q.6a In what country was your mother born?

United States	22.0%
Afghanistan	1.7%
Bangladesh	1.7%
Bolivia	1.7%
Canada	3.4%
Egypt	5.1%
Germany	1.7%
Guyana	1.7%
India	16.9%
Iran	6.8%
Iraq	1.7%
Kashmir	1.7%
Lebanon	11.9%
Malaysia	1.7%
Morocco	1.7%
Pakistan	8.5%
Palestine	1.7%
Tanzania	1.7%
Trinidad and Tobago	1.7%
Turkey	3.4%
Yemen	1.7%

Q.6b In what country was your father born?

United States	25.4%
Afghanistan	1.7%
Bangladesh	1.7%
Bolivia	1.7%
Egypt	5.1%
Germany	1.7%
Guyana	1.7%
India	18.6%
Iran	5.1%
Iraq	3.4%
Italy	1.7%
Lebanon	10.2%
Malaysia	1.7%
Pakistan	8.5%
Palestine	1.7%
Sudan	1.7%

Syria	1.7%
Tanzania	1.7%
Trinidad and Tobago	1.7%
Turkey	1.7%
Yemen	1.7%

## Religion

- Q.7 How important is religion in your life?
- |              |                          |
|--------------|--------------------------|
| <u>16.7%</u> | The most important thing |
| <u>65.0%</u> | Very important           |
| <u>13.3%</u> | Somewhat important       |
| <u>3.3%</u>  | Not too important        |
| <u>1.7%</u>  | Not at all important     |
- Q.8 Which of the following statements comes closest to your view of the Qur'an?
- |              |   |
|--------------|---|
| <u>17.5%</u> | The Qur'an is the word of God and is to be taken literally, word for word                       |
| <u>78.9%</u> | The Qur'an is the word of God, but not everything in it should be taken literally word for word |
| <u>3.5%</u>  | The Qur'an is a book written by men and is not the word of God                                  |
- Q.9 On average, how often do you attend the mosque or Islamic center for salah and Jum'ah prayer?
- |              |  |
|--------------|--|
| <u>13.3%</u> | More than once a week                      |
| <u>18.3%</u> | Once a week Jum'ah prayer                  |
| <u>23.3%</u> | Once or twice a month                      |
| <u>23.3%</u> | A few times a year, especially for the Eid |
| <u>15.0%</u> | Seldom                                     |
| <u>6.7%</u>  | Never                                      |
- Q.10 Which statement comes closest to your view?
- |              |   |
|--------------|---|
| <u>5.1%</u>  | There is only ONE true way to interpret the teachings of Islam      |
| <u>94.9%</u> | There is MORE than one true way to interpret the teachings of Islam |
- Q.11 Which of the following best describes your religious identity?
- |              |                    |       |
|--------------|--------------------|-------|
| <u>52.5%</u> | Sunni              |       |
| <u>8.5%</u>  | Shi'a              |       |
| <u>6.8%</u>  | Sufi               |       |
| <u>5.1%</u>  | Secular            |       |
| <u>27.1%</u> | Something else:    |       |
|              | Christian/Buddhist | 6.3%  |
|              | Muslim             | 37.5% |
|              | No Sect            | 6.3%  |

One God	6.3%	
Progressive	6.3%	
Raised Shi'a but I am spiritual		6.3%
Secular Sunni	6.3%	
Shi'a, Catholic	6.3%	
Sunni Sufi	12.5%	
Sunni with a Sufi inflection		6.3%

## Issues

INSTRUCTIONS: Please say whether you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree or strongly disagree with the following statements:

Q.12 The Qur'an condemns all forms of homosexual behavior

- 27.1% Strongly agree
- 25.4% Somewhat agree
- 15.3% Neither agree nor disagree
- 15.3% Somewhat disagree
- 16.9% Strongly disagree

Q.13 The Qur'an has nothing to say about the issue of sexual orientation

- 13.6% Strongly agree
- 8.5% Somewhat agree
- 22.0% Neither agree nor disagree
- 3.4% Somewhat disagree
- 5.1% Strongly disagree

Q.14 Gay and lesbian relationships should be accepted by society

- 54.2% Strongly agree
- 15.3% Somewhat agree
- 22.0% Neither agree nor disagree
- 3.4% Somewhat disagree
- 5.1% Strongly disagree

Q.15 Sexual orientation is determined at birth

- 23.7% Strongly agree
- 22.0% Somewhat agree
- 44.1% Neither agree nor disagree
- 5.1% Somewhat disagree
- 5.1% Strongly disagree

- Q.16 Sexual orientation can be changed  
23.7% Strongly agree  
22.0% Somewhat agree  
44.1% Neither agree nor disagree  
5.1% Somewhat disagree  
5.1% Strongly disagree
- Q.17 Homosexuality is a sin  
11.9% Strongly agree  
6.8% Somewhat agree  
23.7% Neither agree nor disagree  
8.5% Somewhat disagree  
40.7% Strongly disagree
- Q.18 I feel I am well informed about transgender persons and issues  
16.9% Strongly agree  
39.0% Somewhat agree  
13.6% Neither agree nor disagree  
16.9% Somewhat disagree  
11.9% Strongly disagree
- Q.19 When we talk about rights for gay and lesbian people, these include rights for transgender and bisexual people  
54.2% Strongly agree  
20.3% Somewhat agree  
16.9% Neither agree nor disagree  
6.8% Somewhat disagree  
0.0% Strongly disagree
- Q.20 Do you personally know or work with someone who is gay or lesbian?  
86.4% Yes  
13.6% No
- Q.21 IF 'YES' in Q20, is that person? (please check all that apply)  
24.5% Yourself  
26.5% Member of your family  
49.0% A close friend  
59.2% A co-worker  
53.1% An acquaintance  
Other:  
a friend in college  
member of the mosque  
clients  
board member

Q.22 How important is it for the Muslim community (*ummah*) in the U.S. to support the issue of gay and lesbian equality?

- 49.2% Very important
- 32.2% Somewhat important
- 10.2% Not too important
- 8.5% Not at all important

Q.23 What is the best way for gay and lesbian Muslims to further the cause of equality for gay and lesbian people?

- Neither agree nor disagree.
- Initiate dialogue with Muslim community and not be confrontational.
- To keep it individual and private. Not to publicize it.
- Come to table.
- Unsure.
- Engage in social justice for all ... focus on getting the Muslim community to get to pluralism.
- Seek solidarity with other gays and lesbians and connect their struggles. Work to point to their religion's compassion and love and how Islam stands for, justice and brotherhood, not discrimination and hate.
- To develop faith-based discourse that can be facilitated in Muslim institution on a variety of levels.
- To address the issue of pluralism.
- To articulate their own identities and need for inclusion.
- Become better educated in Quran's interpretations; (2) begin congregational prayer seen locally.
- Educate those who question the need for equality. Share your truth and help the community to know truth.
- I'm not sure this can happen in the religious community context as the community is currently constricted.
- To be open about their struggles; diversity the Muslim and LGBTQ narrative by engaging in such discussions and shedding light on this topic.
- Share their stories.
- Create communities that are inclusive of all sexual orientation, gender ID, sects, race, nationality etc.
- Be good human beings i.e. respectful, charitable, listen well, be kind, participate.

- Speak out in the community, get to know people, donate time/money to Muslim projects.
- To be clear and convicted about self.
- Engage student orgs like Muslim Student Association (MSA) in colleges; their national chapter, the MSA National, so these groups can have events about LGBT issues at their national events/conferences.
- To provide religious justification for equality.
- Partner with non-Muslims to further their rights. Push for active voices within the Muslim community.
- Having information bring sessions with Imams or community leaders.
- Be understanding and value all humanity. Encourage growth without demonizing temptation.
- To have discussions and support services for Muslims, learning about/developing and/or struggling with their sexual identities. To suggest counseling for Muslims who may be queer-identified so that the individual has the choices to decide what route to take. This may start with conversations about sexual identities period and then to issues of queer sexuality.
- They already are human beings with a challenge.
- To be themselves.
- To be visibly and vocally Muslim and gay, not be afraid of discrimination.
- Come out and speak up — organize and hold dialogues, make films and get involved whether mosques like it or not.
- To be involved in the struggle.
- Knowledge.
- For some of the brave activist to come out, for more scholarly research on the issue.
- Negotiation works the best particularly with youth generation and social activists.
- Emphasize the importance of committed relationships vs. promiscuity being associated with homosexuality — applies to all whether heterosexual or not.
- Education everywhere.
- Media.
- To educate and have an Imam support/come to the common ground with the LGBT community.
- Build power through organizing.

- They should support the cause and start accepting the gay Muslims as part of the religion as well.
- Try talking.
- Educate about it more in schools and have religious leaders talk about it.
- To help close minded people understand our issues.
- Start dialogue with family members, neighbor, friends then religious leader.
- Education, open dialogue, cultural competency training, use of non-gay allies.
- I believe we need to work indirectly with Muslim community. Associate us first — to have chance to be heard.
- If you mean in the Muslim community: To have the resources they need to be safely out in the community. To my mind, the first steps are for straight Muslims to gain familiarity with glbtq people around them (they don't bite) and to know the legal and doctrinal facts about homosexuality in Islam. If you mean in the general population: Be out and proudly Muslim. There is deep suspicion in the gay community of Muslims in general.
- We need to engage in a clear, rights-based discourse.
- No such thing as a gay or lesbian Muslim. If a person chooses that path, and pursue[s] it openly, then they are out of Islam. If they choose that path, then that is between them and God.
- I am not sure that I understand what you mean by this question, but I do think that things will get better for LGBTQ Muslims in North America as the legal situation for LGBTQ people in general improves. One way I think that we can help things along in this direction is to be more out and more open, in our own lives as well as by getting more involved in LGBTQ orgs and activism generally. But that can be really hard to do for a number of complicated reasons, and I understand why many of us just try to keep our heads down and hope that nobody really notices us.
- Honestly — they should become atheists. The Muslim world has so many issues it needs to deal with, I think equality for gays and lesbians is low on their list. Very little will change in the next 50 years in the Middle East concerning homosexuals — the best thing to do is to leave the religion. Why be part of a group that doesn't accept you?
- Educating the Muslim community about the concept of gay and lesbian, their problems, their rights. This should be done first in their family and henceforth in the society.
- Building alliances on issues that we all share in common as a way to build trust and partnerships; education on the issues facing LGBT communities/individuals; a lot of patience for the arrogance and ignorance in the community.
- Discussions.

- Be vocal. Surround selves with supporters who will keep them up when opposition gets them down. Help arm supporters with information that we can use when confronting the predictable corners of opposition. Hang in there.

- Political and civic involvement.

Q.24 In your experience, how difficult is it to have open discussions about gay and lesbian issues in the Muslim community?

3.4% Not at all difficult

10.2% Not very difficult

32.2% Somewhat difficult

54.2% Very difficult

Q.25 Is there anything you would like to add?

- Islam does not allow anything like this kind.

- This issue needs to be discussed within Muslim Scholars and Scientist (Social & Others) circles in detail through an organized and structured framework of dialogue. The outcome should be the “guidelines” for parents, teachers, employers and Imams on how to deal/accept GL communities.

- The issue is very much related to the one of the main goals of religion: family-reproduction. A lawful marriage or sexual relationship is between men and women.

- What kind of outcome you are looking to come out of this dialogue and survey and what kind of end results your are envisioning for LGBT community.

- Muslim community have multiple other issues that concern their daily life: unemployment, immigration, social justice, Islamophobia, domestic violence all these problems deserve as much attention and study.

- Thank you for this opportunity. It is very challenging for me and helping me stretch my identity.

- This is the first time I have had opportunity to participate in such a discussion or seen it raised. It's very important to raise the profile of this conversation in the community and bring it into the discussion that are already ongoing about gender in Islam, women's rights, Islam & American identity, Islam & pluralism, Islam & justice, etc. from such a scholarly and community perspective.

- Very happy to participate with such great members if the DC Muslim community

- Social equality is protected (as should be) by constitutional and human right laws and covenants. However, the evidence of majority interpretation of Qur'anic law might make this a difficult subject for Muslims to engage. Also, there is a common sentiment that sexual molestation of children (particularly boys) may impact sexual orientation in later life. Are we willing to examine whether homosexuality may (in part) be a consequence of

the psychological trauma caused by molestation/rape/abuse done to many boys at an early age? Or is it perhaps influenced by extreme gender segregation in childhood education/development? Or is homosexuality influenced by cultural (rather than biological) factors? Questions, Questions! But that said — compassion, mercy and love should always guide out interrogations and our regard for all human beings!

- I strongly support this cause. I appreciate the work Intersections is doing to progress understandings of various identity.

- Thank you!

- People need to not be afraid to think for themselves, stop running to “Imams” to do the thinking for them; creative and independent thought & religious expression need to be rewarded. I wish that the U.S. would provide some funding to religious (minority) organizations as is done in the E.U. designed to foster inclusion of diverse voices in the dialog of the society.

- There is much work to be done in terms of educating the acceptance and eradicating fear of Islam. For some of our American population, knowing that LG issues are important among Muslims will further partnership, camaraderie and understanding. For other parts of American culture this will delay/deter acceptance. We must be smart and work on many fronts simultaneously. Thank you Intersections for responsibly taking this on in addition to continuing your other important interfaith initiatives.

- I think attitudes are changing, younger people are more open to LGBT issues. However, the issue of sexuality needs to be dealt with in all faith communities.

- This exercise has been educational and informative.

- The attitudes among people will change if they feel safe, peaceful and that there is justice. The abuse of LGBT people, I feel will continue as long as there is injustice - violence against women, incest, drug abuse, disease, etc.

- Also Q 17 (homosexuality a sin?) is biased because many Muslims differentiates between homosexual feelings vs. the execution of those homosexual feelings into physical actions. Many Muslims believe simply having homosexual inclinations is not a sin but acting upon them is a sin — so they differentiate between merely having the feeling vs. acting upon them. It’s very important to distinguish these 2 questions vs. just asking “Is homosexuality a sin?”

- In Islam, you can be Muslim and also gay — nothing can prevent a Muslim from severing their relations with God! This is a social issue.

- I think bisexuality should be added to #14 and #20.

- LGBTQ rights should be framed within a human rights perspective. We as American don’t live in a theocratic state so we have to live by the principles of equality for all.

- Thank you!
- More of these type of discussions need to take place. A closed discussion with only LGBTQ Muslim individuals should also take place.
- I believe that it depends on their own gays and lesbians to get involved with other communities and people. Their social behavior and point of views are able to be more and more acceptable to other people. Negotiation and being involved with people make liaison and connection between them and people.
- This is part of a very long process of introducing new ways for Muslims to reflect on Islam's human relations principles.
- Good luck.
- If there is a will there is a way. Build a strong base within your family. When families or groups with strong base can make change in the Muslim community
- The focus group is a good start. More dialogue is needed must include religious leaders, gays and allies!
- Women — we need help to exist.
- I said that it was not too important for the community to get up to speed on gay and lesbian equality because it's just not going to happen with the most conservative sector. Pick your battles.
- As people of the Book, God's Books, i.e., the Torah, Gospel and Qur'an, we have a responsibility to uphold God's law. If people choose to follow their own immoral abominations, that is between them and God, and it is irrelevant if they refuse to believe there is a God, b/c there is only one God, the one who created men/women. However, when such people choose to openly engage and pursue that type of life-style, then the people who truly believe and follow God's words have the responsibility to stand against those people. I don't ever believe in "gay bashing" or killing such individuals, but we should not support them or their life-style. Don't get mad at those of us who are upholding God's criteria, get mad at HIM. What God has forbidden will never be correct and what HE has allowed or made lawful will never be wrong. I honestly, believe that this country's (the U.S.) biggest threat is not terrorism, it is the reemergence of "Sodom and Gomorrah." We have allow and are allowing the systematic legality of a "Sodom and Gomorrah" society. We are institutionalizing it, and this will be the U.S.'s downfall.
- I think that it is several larger issues which make these discussions particularly difficult: One is the way that "identity politics" (among Muslims and in the wider society) tends to empower those who can claim a "pure" identity and marginalize those who don't fit into neat little boxes. A lot of people seem to be invested in seeing being queer and Muslim as mutually exclusive categories. Another factor is text-fundamentalism, which puts what texts say at the centre and ways away any serious discussion of how these texts impact real people's lives and the abuses which often result. North American conservative Muslim discourses on sexuality

in general (not just on LGBTQ issues) are often appalling — take a look at [www.sunnipath.com](http://www.sunnipath.com) for examples of what heterosexuals are being taught. If [marital] rape, and the teaching that a woman can't leave the house without her husband's permission are not recognized as abusive notions which are opposed to human dignity, how is it possible that our rights as queer Muslims will ever be taken seriously? Those who tell women in such situations to be patient and accept God's will would have no difficulty telling gays and lesbians that they have to marry heterosexually or spend their entire lives alone, and they wouldn't see the inhumanity of such advice. The whole paradigm has to shift. I am not sure how much more suffering there has to be before that will happen.

- People should be treated with dignity and should not be discriminated against because of their sexual orientation.
- No one should be mistreated by state or society based on who they are or how they choose to live.



## Appendix B — Invitation Letter

274 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10001 212.951.7006 [www.intersectionsinternational.org](http://www.intersectionsinternational.org)

December 20, 2010

Friends:

Greetings in this season!

This invitation to a special Intersections event is being sent to a select list of friends and colleagues. As you know, Intersections is a non-profit organization located in New York City that has built its reputation on developing transformational dialogues around some of the most pressing issues of our day. We work at the crossroads among veterans and civilians, with indigenous people and immigrants, with Muslims and non-Muslims, with the LGBT community and people of faith; with youth, artists and Native Americans here in New York and across the country. You may learn more about Intersections [here](#).

Recently, Intersections received a small grant to launch an exploratory study titled, “The Muslim Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender (LGBT) Inclusion Project.” The aim of this study is to engage key Muslim thought leaders in the theology, religious practice and academia—as well as practicing Muslims from a wide swath of the American landscape—to explore scriptural passages from the Qur’an regarding homosexuality; examine different cultural and historic practices in relating to LGBT individuals, uncover existing support and resistance, and consider the shape of an evidence-based strategy for future action.

To that end, we are hosting six conversations in “safe spaces” across the U.S., with key stakeholders in local Muslim communities to explore the possibility of “a new way forward” in relating to LGBT Muslims. These conversations are by invitation only, and we would like you to be a part of our Washington, DC gathering on Friday, January 21 from 10:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. at Georgetown’s Berkeley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs, 3307 M Street in Washington. We are looking for 12-15 participants who are willing to participate in a thoughtful and honest facilitated dialogue on this topic. Anonymity will be assured (everyone will be asked to sign a confidentiality agreement). A continental breakfast and lunch will be provided for all.

The final outcome of this project will be a report that explores the question: “what is the place of LGBT Muslims in the larger Muslim community and in U.S. society as a whole?” These conversations are one important aspect in collecting data for an informed response to this question. Your participation and input in our Washington gathering will greatly enrich the conversation.

If you are interested in attending or learning more, please respond to my colleague Sara Reef at [sreef@intersectionsinternational.org](mailto:sreef@intersectionsinternational.org). More details will be provided upon RSVP. We hope you can join us.

Sincerely,

The Rev. Robert Chase  
Founding Director