

Temple Tracts: Issue 5, Volume 2

# Religion and Sexual Minorities: The Experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) Muslims

Shanon Shah



**William Temple**  
Foundation

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## Introduction

Headlines were rife with questions about Islam's supposedly exceptional problem with homophobia after the massacre at Pulse, the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) nightclub in Orlando – the deadliest mass shooting in US history. Several reports focused on the shooter Omar Mateen's support for the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) despite being active on gay dating sites and having frequented the nightclub before (BBC 2016).

The responses ranged from downright anti-Muslim bigotry from right-leaning commentators (e.g. see Hopkins 2016; Yiannopoulos 2016) to denials from several Muslim leaders that the mass killing had anything to do with Islam (e.g. see 5Pillars 2016; Burke 2016). The majority of Muslim leaders clearly condemned Mateen's actions but several added that Islam unquestionably forbids 'homosexuality' and/or 'homosexual behaviour'.

On 18 June 2016, barely a week after the massacre, St Andrew's church in Waterloo, London, was packed with people of diverse religious backgrounds and sexual identities. They were gathered for a 'big gay *iftaar* (fast-breaking)' organised by Asad Dhunna, an openly gay British Muslim blogger and activist. Dhunna was appalled not only by the homophobic killings in Orlando but that they were committed during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan, when Muslims are ordained to fast from sunrise to sunset. This is why he organised the event; it was not merely a statement against homophobia, biphobia and transphobia but also a sacred act.

The church space was abuzz hours before the actual *iftaar*. One of Dhunna's friends prepared a delicious vegetarian feast free of charge and volunteers were cheerfully laying out the food. Jews, Muslims, Christians, atheists, agnostics and others – LGBT and heterosexual – sat cross-legged on the floor, chatting away before being officially welcomed by Canon Giles Goddard, the vicar of St John's with St Andrew's in Waterloo. Dhunna had also organised a short panel – consisting of a Muslim therapist, a community leader from a London mosque and an activist from the LGBT group Stonewall – in the minutes before *iftaar*. After the panel discussion, Dhunna's sister said a short prayer and paid an emotional tribute to her brother's courage in organising the event. Dhunna then invited me to perform the *adhan* (call to prayer), before which I requested a moment's silence and recited the *Al-Fatiha* (the opening chapter of the Qur'an) in memory of the Orlando victims. After the meal, some of us – Muslims and non-Muslims – congregated in a non-consecrated space for non-segregated and non-sectarian *Maghrib* (dusk) prayers led by Halima Gosai Hussain, the chair of the Inclusive Mosque Initiative.

The event was covered by a few media channels, including Channel 4, and ended with an uproarious raffle. I had moving conversations with several people, including some of the Muslims who wanted to know how they could be more effective LGBT allies.

The next day, Dhunna appeared on the BBC's Sunday Programme to talk about the aftermath of Orlando, alongside the *imam* Asad Zaman who said (Radio 4 2016):

Those who indulge in homosexual behaviour, there are two ways of looking at them. If...you acknowledge that homosexual behaviour is sinful...then you are still within the domain of Islam but you are a sinner. If you no longer regard homosexual behaviour as sinful then you are stepping outside the domain of Islam. Because there are certain prohibitions that are hardwired in the Qur'an and they cannot be changed by anybody.

Apart from what amounted to an 'admit you're a sinner or leave' ultimatum, Zaman advised Dhunna not to 'indulge' in his feelings and argued that all other religions also forbade homosexual behaviour. Dhunna disagreed with Zaman but there was clearly not enough time to engage in a deeper discussion. It was also impossible for Dhunna to convey the sheer goodwill and multi-faith positivity of the previous night's big gay *iftaar*. Listeners were left with a frustratingly one-dimensional discussion between an anti-homosexual imam and a gay Muslim without learning anything about either Islam's complex position on sexual morality or the experiences of LGBT Muslims. This Temple Tract aims to expand upon this discussion by looking at the journeys of some LGBT Muslims.

Of the other traditional Islamic authorities who gave similar responses to Zaman, many were from Muslim-majority countries with laws that criminalise homosexual and non-marital heterosexual relations – some with the death sentence (Al Arabiya 2016; Brown 2016; New York Times 2016). In the British context, some LGBT Muslim activists argue that such views can exacerbate the suffering of LGBT Muslim youth who are already ostracised by their families or who are forced into marriages, or who suffer from depression and suicidal tendencies because of their struggles with gender and sexual identity (Roberts 2014).

In this Temple Tract, however, I highlight how some LGBT Muslims are taking charge and reinterpreting Islam to expand notions of equality, diversity and social justice and to rethink notions of sinfulness. I explore how they create alternative pedagogies and 'educational projects' (Freire 1996: 36) to respond to these dominant arguments by traditional Islamic authorities. I propose that their strategies are an example of how Islam can be a 'cultural resource' – locally and globally – for some LGBT Muslims and their Muslim allies who advocate more inclusive interpretations of the religion (Beckford 2001: 233; Beckford 2000: 169). I do not claim that these are 'true' or 'authentic' manifestations of Islam. My aim is rather to show how some Muslims – LGBT Muslims in particular – are creatively and thoughtfully engaging in alternative religious interpretations. I also examine whether these LGBT Muslims are drawing upon an important, yet sometimes overlooked, aspect of classical Islamic jurisprudence – that the derivation of religious rulings was "'always already" [subjected] to acts of interpretation' (Ali 2012: 154). Based on my own qualitative research, I discuss the Demystifying *Sharia* workshops devised and conducted by the British Muslim LGBT organisation *Imaan* ('faith' in Arabic) between 2012 and 2015 and examine their wider impacts.

## Understanding Muslim sexual minorities

When I started telling non-Muslim British acquaintances that I was researching the experiences of gay Muslims in Malaysia and Britain, I was often met with incredulity ('How on earth are you going to find them?'), fear ('Be careful for your safety!'), pity ('It must be so hard for the poor things,') or condescension ('Islam really needs a Reformation.'). A few of the Muslims I told were quite defensive ('Why are you doing this Orientalist research?' or 'Are you trying to change the Qur'an?'), patronising ('Homophobia really comes from the West, you know, not from Islam,') and condescending ('Are there not more important things to study?'). These responses are quite telling – discussions on the subject are often laden with people's preconceived notions and stereotypes about 'gay' sexuality, 'Islam' and 'Western' values. Debates on Islam and sexual diversity thus have a history that is intertwined with the development of anti-Muslim stereotypes in the West and in anti-Western counter-stereotypes that emerged in Muslim societies. With that said, the vast majority of non-Muslims and Muslims I have shared my research with – in Malaysia and Britain – have responded with curiosity, generosity and genuine support, which shows that nobody needs to buy into crude caricatures of 'Islam' and the 'West'.

It is beyond the scope of this Temple Tract to elaborate on these anti-Muslim and anti-Western stereotypes, but they are amply discussed in the growing scholarship and activism on the experiences of Muslim sexual minorities in secular liberal democracies in the West as well as in Muslim-majority societies (e.g. see Boellstorff 2005; Gaudio 2009; Habib 2010; Hamzic 2012; Kugle 2014; Massad 2007; Siraj 2012; Yip and Khalid 2010). This body of work also includes critical inquiries into how diverse expressions of gender and sexuality existed and evolved in various Muslim societies in the past (e.g. see El-Rouayheb 2009; Najmabadi 2005; Ze'evi 2006). As a nascent body of work, these empirical studies continually inform the efforts of some Muslim academics and activists to promote interpretations of Islam that embrace gender and sexual diversity (e.g. see Ali 2012; Kugle 2010).

In this Temple Tract, I demonstrate how these strands of scholarship and activism inspire some LGBT Muslims and their allies to promote more inclusive approaches towards gender and sexuality within Islam. The sociologist of religion James Beckford (2001: 233) suggests that it makes 'good sociological sense to think of religion less as a social institution and more as a cultural resource susceptible to many different uses'. Instead of being a 'sacred canopy' (Berger 1990) that permanently provides identity, meaning, inspiration, and consolation to large numbers of people, religion, Beckford (2001, 232) argues, 'increasingly serves as a resource to which individuals and groups may have recourse from time to time'. This perspective of religion holds true for some LGBT Muslims and their allies whom I would argue use Islam as a 'cultural resource' to promote their own inclusive interpretations of the religion.

They do this by drawing upon aspects of Islamic jurisprudence and interpretations of sacred texts to challenge dominant contemporary understandings of Islam which forbid or condemn homosexuality and/or LGBT identities. I will highlight how some LGBT Muslims turn these alternative interpretations into 'educational projects' (Freire 1996: 36) that

embrace gender equality and sexual diversity from within an Islamic framework. I propose that their pedagogical strategies are an example of what the educationalist Paulo Freire (1996: 64–65) refers to as ‘problem-posing education’ which also motivates their broader advocacy for equality, inclusion and social justice.

In turn, these ‘educational projects’ by some LGBT Muslims are inspired and informed by the growing body of scholarship and activism among international and local networks of Islamic feminists (Kugle 2003). These networks, such as *Musawah* (‘equality’ in Arabic), aim to produce new knowledge that advances gender equality and social change in Muslim contexts (Mir-Hosseini, Al-Sharmani, and Rumminger 2015). This production of alternative Islamic knowledge by some LGBT Muslims and Islamic feminists is therefore part of the developing interconnections between particular Muslim movements worldwide. These interconnections illustrate some of the ways that globalisation affects religious change and vice versa (Beckford 2000: 165).

This production of Islamic knowledge by LGBT Muslims and their allies is not without its challenges and contradictions, however. As the American Islamic feminist scholar Kecia Ali (2012: 151) argues, modern liberal understandings of consent and mutuality are ‘structurally impossible within the constraints of lawful sexuality as defined by the classical Muslim scholars’. In this Temple Tract, however, I show how some LGBT Muslims are addressing these challenges by incorporating their personal experiences and insights into wider debates on religious interpretation.



## In search of LGBT Muslims

I attended my first meeting at Imaan, the British LGBT Muslim organisation, in late 2010 when I came to London to study for my Master of Arts. I had joined their confidential online forum and soon learned about a closed discussion session with Daayiee Abdullah, an openly gay American imam, who was visiting Britain at the time. Around 10 Muslim men – identifying as either gay, bisexual or transgender – met in a free space provided by an LGBT charity in Central London. Another session had been organised for Imaan’s women members on a different date – they had requested a separate discussion so that they could comfortably ask Abdullah candid questions in a women’s space.

The discussion with Abdullah that I attended fluctuated between reverence and irreverence. Questions ranged from *halal* (permissible) ways for gay Muslim couples to adopt children, negotiating romantic relationships with non-Muslim partners and whether it was okay to have casual sex in gay saunas. Abdullah chuckled at the last question and asked what the questioner really wanted – a loving, lasting connection with someone or the sexual equivalent of bingeing on junk food, booze and drugs? The imam did not once mention sinfulness but rather made the connection between a loving relationship with a romantic partner (which he said would include good sex) and a healthy spirituality. After the discussion, we performed congregational *Maghrib* prayers (with Abdullah insisting that someone else lead – it was his way of empowering Imaan members) and then had dinner in Chinatown.

Before coming to London, I already had some background knowledge of Imaan. I was involved in several human rights groups in Malaysia prior to pursuing academia and in this context had attended numerous events organised by the Islamic feminist organisation Sisters in Islam (SIS). Through these networks, I also came into contact with other Islamic feminists such as the African American theologian Amina Wadud. Wadud is a vocal LGBT Muslim ally (Kaleem 2012) and made headlines when she led a controversial mixed-gender Friday prayer and delivered the *khutbah* (sermon) in 2005. She and Imam Daayiee Abdullah are part of the same milieu of progressive Muslim activists in North America which is in turn linked with Muslim activists in other parts of the world.

During that first session with Abdullah, I asked a couple of questions about certain nuances in Islamic jurisprudence which also raised the interest of some of the other attendees. These members and Trustees soon became my friends, even before I commenced my doctoral research in January 2012. They eventually expressed interest in the kinds of training workshops I had attended at organisations such as SIS. When the former Imaan chair finally asked if I would consider conducting similar workshops for them, I saw this as an organic and crucial development in my research.

Between October 2012 and September 2013, I interviewed 29 individuals – 17 in Malaysia and 12 in Britain – and observed and participated in their various social activities, including recreational sports, nightclubbing and activism. I was interested in individuals who

identified as Muslim and were attracted to people of the same sex but I initially did not want to impose any labels on them. I was wary of framing my conversations with terms such as 'queer', 'LGBT', 'gay' or 'homosexual' because of their contested nature. I decided, however, that I would not include the experiences of transgender Muslims because of the different ways that they are stigmatised and the different religious arguments used to condemn or accept them. For example, transgender identities and rights are officially recognised in the Islamic Republic of Iran, where the state even supports sex reassignment, while male and female homosexuality remains illegal. In Malaysia, however, both transgenderism and homosexuality are illegal under civil and Muslim state laws.

My strategy was to ask open-ended questions about how my participants were comfortable identifying themselves – the vast majority of men and women I interviewed described themselves as 'gay'. Labels are complicated, though – many did not *solely* identify as 'gay'. Most of the women used terms like 'fluid', 'lesbian' or 'bisexual' alongside 'gay' in our numerous conversations, while some of the men also used 'gay' together with 'queer' and 'bisexual'. In Malaysia, some described themselves as 'gay' while simultaneously identifying as '*pengkid*' (a sometimes derogatory term for butch women), '*pondan*' (a sometimes derogatory term for effeminate men or male-to-female transgenders) and even 'trans'. For some, the term 'LGBT' had overtly activist and/or white Western connotations which made them uncomfortable. Others embraced the term 'LGBT' quite easily. Because of this terminological maze, one of my Malaysian participants jokingly said, 'I'm post-gay and post-Muslim.' I have chosen to use terminology that reflects how my participants most commonly described themselves – when referring collectively to my Malaysian and British sample, I generally use 'gay'. In this Temple Tract, I zoom in on the experiences of some members of Imaan, and therefore the term 'LGBT' is more representative.

In both countries, I also attended and participated in other public events related to Islam and/or LGBT issues, including seminars, debates and talks. Additionally, I attended and made notes of congregational Friday prayers and *khutbahs* in both countries to assess if or how gender and sexuality were discussed in mosque settings. I supplemented this interviewing and participant observation with context-setting media analysis.

My scholarly interest overlapped greatly with my own personal journey – I identify as gay and Muslim, too. This is why I was eager to help Imaan members by sharing various aspects of my work – it was as much about personal conscience as it was about professional responsibility. I considered it ethical to share my ongoing research on Islam, gender and sexuality with other LGBT Muslims who were on their own identity journeys. For the sake of transparency and accountability, I declared my personal and scholarly considerations prior to and during all Demystifying Sharia workshops as well as throughout my fieldwork. To ensure that I had more balanced perspectives, I also met with and interviewed other LGBT Muslims – of my 12 British participants, two were not Imaan members and remain so at the time of writing.

My experiences illuminate the larger phenomenon of particular Muslim groupings which are constructing and circulating alternative interpretations of Islam. As mentioned above, these

include movements that can be considered politically progressive such as the global Islamic feminist movement Musawah (Mir-Hosseini, Al-Sharmani, and Rumminger 2015). However, these alternative channels can also include movements considered to be ‘fundamentalist’ or ‘extremist’ which advocate understandings of Islam that are not sanctioned by conventional Islamic authorities. For example, the teachings and policies of the so-called Islamic State (IS) have also been condemned by conventional Islamic *ulama* (religious scholars) for bypassing the traditional channels of religious knowledge and rule-making – most famously in their online ‘Open Letter to Al-Baghdadi’.

Against this backdrop, LGBT Muslim academics and activists in certain countries also operate outside of conventional religious frameworks to advocate for pro-LGBT interpretations of Islam. In the bigger picture, these LGBT Muslims, Islamic feminists and supporters of IS might have very different agendas but they are all making ‘interpretive choices, not merely [producing] straightforward iterations of “what Islam says”’ (Ali 2012: 153). Their experiences and those of many other Muslims demonstrate that religion is increasingly a ‘cultural resource’ that is difficult for institutional authorities to control. This Tract investigates a very particular example of how some LGBT Muslims are using Islam as a ‘cultural resource’ to advocate for pro-LGBT expressions of the religion. It demonstrates the ways in which these alternative interpretations empower some LGBT Muslims to become ‘their own example in the struggle for their redemption’ (Freire 1996, 36).

## Demystifying Sharia: a case study

The workshops that I developed for Imaan attracted LGBT Muslim participants who had been taught that Islam categorically condemns homosexuality. They would have internalised arguments along the lines presented by imam Asad Zaman to Asad Dhunna, the gay Muslim activist, on the BBC Sunday Programme. However, as LGBT people who considered themselves Muslim, they struggled with these sentiments and were eager to hear alternative arguments from an Islamic perspective.

In Britain, nine out of my 12 participants received Islamic education through their local *madrasas* (mosque schools), which they attended after their usual schooling hours. (Of the three who did not attend madrasa schooling in Britain as children, one converted to Islam in her early 20s, one came to the UK in his mid-teens as an asylum seeker and one migrated to the UK in her early 20s.) While three among these research participants suggested that they enjoyed the madrasa experience, the rest shared similar reactions as Ebrahim, a gay Indian Muslim male in his early 20s:

It was, you know, this is Islam. What we are telling you, you do this, don't question it. There's no need to ask questions because this is what it is.

It was within this rigid context that my participants said that they had never encountered inclusive or pro-LGBT interpretations of Islam in madrasa, but several did encounter anti-homosexual Islamic teachings. Their experiences contextualise the significance that the Demystifying Sharia workshops held for the many LGBT Muslims who attended.

The workshops that I developed for Imaan were initially modelled after a training module by the Malaysian-based SIS (Sisters in Islam 2004). The SIS workshops are designed to encourage interactive learning about Islamic teachings and laws that affect the status of Muslim women, discussing them critically and offering alternative interpretations that can better uphold gender equality. Starting from the late 1990s, the SIS workshops were designed, piloted and refined through collaboration between SIS staff and members (consisting of sharia and civil lawyers, theologians, social scientists and feminist activists); other scholars of Islam from various disciplines, including jurisprudence, theology and the social sciences; and grassroots Muslim women's groups. They are primarily a learning tool to improve the legal and religious literacy of Muslim women in Malaysia from various backgrounds.

The content of the workshops, however, is not narrow and can be emotionally and intellectually liberating for Muslims and non-Muslims who are actively seeking inclusive interpretations of Islam. For example, I remember being humbled and inspired when I first learned, at a SIS workshop, that the eighth century jurist Malik ibn Anas (after whom the Maliki school in Sunni Islam is named) resisted attempts to turn his religious opinions into state law. Under threat of persecution and imprisonment for his position, he reportedly told the Abbasid Caliph Harun Al-Rashid, 'Diversity of opinion is Allah's gift to the *ummah*

(community of believers).’ Narratives such as these, evidenced from classical Islamic sources, powerfully set the stage for further discussions on diverse Islamic approaches to gender equality and sexual diversity. They are all the more potent for being largely absent from traditional Islamic education, such as those offered by the madrasas that many of my participants attended as children.

The strong state regulation of Islam in Malaysia, especially with laws that disadvantage Muslim women (Sisters in Islam 2005; Sisters in Islam 2013), has had the effect of turning these workshops into an alternative syllabus of Islamic education for those who attend. These workshops also form part of SIS’s larger activism to challenge inequalities and injustices in state laws on Islam and/or the pronouncements of prominent Islamic authorities. Within this context, SIS is constantly accused by various state and non-state Islamic authorities of being ‘deviant’ and ‘insulting Islam’ (Bedi 2014; Loh and Shah 2009). Despite these conditions, SIS’s in-house trainers and facilitators continue to facilitate these workshops for various other audiences including sympathetic secular feminists, human rights lawyers and activists, journalists, university students and artists and performers. The workshops focus on the most relevant areas of Qur’anic interpretation, *hadith* (the exemplary sayings of the Prophet Muhammad), *fiqh* (jurisprudence), and a chronology of historical and political constructions of Islamic laws whilst also eliciting discussions that draw upon participants’ lived experiences.

After attending several sessions at SIS, I was mentored by other senior Muslim scholars and activists in Malaysia and was eventually trained at SIS to facilitate the workshops for various audiences. Because I had gained what I considered to be empowering knowledge and self-confidence through this experience, I asked some Imaan members if they had developed similar workshops. The then Chair of Imaan told me that they had piecemeal discussions on Islam and sexual diversity, through one-off conferences or talks, but had not devised anything comparably systematic or repeatable. He assured me that there would be huge demand from many Imaan members if I were to replicate such workshops for them. It was then that I took up his request and adapted the SIS workshops and supplemented them with material from my own doctoral research, making sure to obtain the necessary approval from SIS beforehand. I then facilitated a pilot one-day workshop for a group of approximately 20 LGBT Muslims in London, mostly Imaan members, in April 2012, calling it ‘Demystifying Sharia’.

A typical full-day Demystifying Sharia workshop consisted of six sessions following a particular sequence – discussing the concepts of ‘gender’ and ‘sexuality’; contextualising specific Qur’anic verses that are generally seen as misogynistic or homophobic (e.g. see Kugle 2010); similarly analysing hadith that are widely seen as misogynistic or homophobic (Mernissi 1991; Sisters in Islam 2004); investigating the historical diversity in *fiqh* regarding gender and sexuality (e.g. see Ali 2012; El-Rouayheb 2009; Kugle 2010; Ze’evi 2006); summarising the history of Islamic politics and law; and having a final discussion on practical ways to promote more inclusive interpretations of Islam. These sessions were interspersed with interactive activities to build trust, comfort and camaraderie among the attendees and between them and me as the facilitator.

There were some key epistemological assumptions that grounded these workshops. For example, although the opening session discussed gender and sex in relatively jargon-free terms, the underlying approach treated gender as a social construct. The sessions on textual interpretations and jurisprudence also distinguished between the terms *sharia* (divine law) and *fiqh* (jurisprudence, i.e. human effort to express the divine law). *Fiqh* was then distinguished from the codified state laws that are now found in many Muslim-majority countries – historical constructions of *fiqh* incorporated greater interpretive diversity and flexibility and were vibrantly debated among jurists. The contemporary legal scholar Mohammad Hashim Kamali (2006, 4) further argues that in the *Sunnah* (recorded traditions of the Prophet Muhammad), the words *sharia* and *fiqh* do not carry the same legalistic meanings that they are commonly associated with now. This background laid the foundation for the rest of the day's discussions on Qur'anic interpretations, *hadith* and *fiqh* as social and historical constructs.

Before each workshop, I would circulate a brief explainer and invitation through Imaan's channels – including its email list, Facebook group and online forum – and those who were interested would need to complete a brief questionnaire. The questionnaire was designed to gauge people's reasons for joining the workshop, their expectations for the day and for participants to highlight particular issues that they wanted the facilitator to address. Workshop attendees were requested to commit to attending the entire workshop since the sessions and discussions were built sequentially. I conducted the workshops free of charge as this was a way for me to give back to Imaan Trustees and members who had so generously participated in my research. I was also aware that Imaan operated on a very tight budget and that some attendees – including students and asylum seekers – would have been disadvantaged if they had to pay a fee.

The workshops were held at venues that Imaan could book gratis or at minimal cost from its various partners or supporters among LGBT charities. Between 2012 and 2015, I coordinated six full-day workshops in London, Manchester and Birmingham. I also devised a full-day training of trainers for a few Imaan members in early 2013 who then facilitated the workshops in Manchester and Birmingham under my supervision. Each workshop attracted around 10 to 20 LGBT Muslims and sometimes some of their friends/families/allies would also attend. Attendees ranged from their early 20s to their early 50s and ranged in their degrees of religious commitment – from the very devout to the nominally Muslim. They also came from diverse regional, class and ethnic backgrounds – including British Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, Indians, Arabs, Iranians and white converts – and Sunni and Shi'a orientations. In fact, I eventually expanded the workshop material to include more Shi'a perspectives – the SIS module was initially much more Sunni-centric, as the Malaysian Islamic legal system is largely informed by the Sunni Shafii school. At the end of the workshop, I invited attendees anonymously to fill in brief feedback forms which asked what they liked, what could have been done better and what could have been done differently.

Apart from these full-day workshops, I adapted particular sections of Demystifying Sharia for shorter, standalone presentations or discussions at Imaan events. Eventually, other Imaan members who had attended the workshop also did the same proactively, either at

Imaan events or for their own networks. From 2015 onwards, I began piloting these workshops for non-LGBT and/or non-Muslim audiences, including a group of Student Leaders at a state-run high school and a small group of Muslim counsellors and mosque community leaders in Greater London.

## Reading the Qur'an from a pro-LGBT perspective

A typical Demystifying Sharia workshop would attract LGBT Muslim participants from various ethnic backgrounds and doctrinal orientations within Islam. For example, at a workshop in London in 2013, there was a lesbian British Pakistani Shi'a, a bisexual Bangladeshi-born Sunni, a couple of gay British Pakistani Sunnis (one of whom was a former member of an 'extreme' Islamic group), a gay British Vietnamese convert to Sunni Islam, a gay British Indian convert to Shi'a Islam, an agnostic gay East African, a gay Egyptian and a lesbian East African Shi'a. At this particular workshop, it was obvious that the participants were getting progressively more excited about the material being presented. At some point, I mentioned that it was not Imaan's intention to impose a particular interpretation of Islam on everyone but to offer a space for diverse opinions. The bisexual Bangladeshi man half-jokingly retorted, 'Oh, I fully intend to hit my parents on the head with this stuff.'

What happens in these workshops to provoke such eager responses from some of the participants? As an example, this section illustrates how the workshop generates discussion on interpretations of the Qur'an which purportedly condemn 'homosexuality'. The content in this session was developed largely based upon the work of Scott Siraj Al-Haqq Kugle, a scholar of South Asian and Islamic Studies who is also Muslim and openly gay. Kugle (2010) argues that the Qur'an does not contain any equivalents of the term 'homosexuality' as it is currently understood. Rather, it contains passages that classical Muslim interpreters relied upon to develop the concept of *liwat* (sodomy). The term *liwat* does not occur in the Qur'an and is a coinage that refers to the conduct of the followers of the Prophet Lut. According to Kugle (2010, 69), '*liwat* denoted anal penetration as an act, and said nothing about the intention, sexual orientation, or inner disposition of the person performing the act'. This part of Demystifying Sharia thus focuses on the primary verses that are overwhelmingly used to condemn *liwat*, for example: 'And Lut! (Remember) when he said to his people: Will you commit abomination such as no creature ever did before you? You come with lust to men instead of women. No, but you are immoral people.' (Qur'an 7: 80-81)

As part of the unfolding discussion, the facilitator encourages the attendees to investigate the correspondence of the Qur'anic passages on Lut with the story of Lot and the punishment of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah in the Book of Genesis. Attendees are made aware, for example, of the more detailed narrative found in Genesis compared with the shorter and sometimes vaguer Qur'anic vignettes. During the workshop, several different English translations of the Qur'an are made available and attendees are given the references to all the other passages on Lut to examine for themselves. For reference, the other verses related to Lut can be found in Qur'an 54:33-40, 37:133-138, 50:13, 26:160-175, 15:58-77, 38:13-14, 21:74-75, 27:55-58, 11:70, 11:74 and 11:77-83, 29:26 and 29:28-35, 7:80-84, 6:86, 22:43-44, and 66:10 (Omar 2012: 225-26). Attendees are invited to discuss key points in the story and to feed back their own impressions or feelings about it. They are then given the opportunity to look at some alternative readings of these verses throughout Islamic history and up to the present by both classical and contemporary Islamic scholars.



The ensuing discussion begins with the facilitator noting that some classical interpreters saw the Lut story as encompassing a host of other sins, including murder, robbery and sexual assault, not merely 'homosexuality' (Kugle 2010: 51–52). Furthermore, because the Qur'anic narratives summarise and echo references to the Biblical Lot, attendees are also introduced to Christian pro-LGBT interpretations of these passages which largely parallel pro-LGBT Islamic approaches (e.g. see Goddard 2008). Attendees are encouraged to refer to the available translations of the Qur'an to observe that Lut is mentioned alongside other Prophets, for example 'Noah, Salih, Hud, Shu'ayb, and Moses' whose stories are unrelated to sexuality but touch upon larger issues of 'moral accountability' (Kugle 2010: 57). The facilitator then asks a series of questions about whether the Lut narratives relate to loving, consensual same-sex relationships or sexualised forms of assault, exploitation and violence.

To close this section of the workshop, attendees are introduced to Qur'anic passages that enjoin diversity and equality, for example: 'And of His signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the difference of your languages and your colours. In this indeed are signs for men of knowledge.' (Qur'an 30:22)

As Kugle (2010: 44) argues, the Qur'anic term for 'colour' (*lawn*) 'can refer not just to visible hues but to other sensations like the "taste" of different dishes of food or aromas'. Attendees are asked to reflect upon Kugle's suggestion that the underlying ethos of this verse goes far deeper than skin colour and includes 'the inner core of our personalities', including 'diversity in sexuality'.

The rest of the session also includes some discussion on the basic principles of Qur'anic interpretation and Arabic grammar (Sisters in Islam 2004). For example, the facilitator introduces the implications of the gendered nature of the Arabic language and how this influences Qur'anic interpretation. Attendees are also introduced to concepts developed by classical Qur'anic exegetes such as *asbab al-nuzul* (circumstances of revelation) to gain a better understanding of the contextual nature of Qur'anic interpretation. The following sections on *hadith*, *fiqh* and Islamic history incorporate very similar interactive elements interspersed with blocks of substantive input by the facilitator. To clarify, however, I have discussed interpretations of *liwat* in this section for simplicity but the workshop is interspersed with more detailed analyses of *sihaq* (tribadism) as well.

## LGBT expressions of Islam

Demystifying Sharia received consistently excellent feedback from attendees in London, Birmingham and Manchester. Their anonymous comments often singled out the workshop's encouragement of non-judgemental, accessible perspectives on Islamic approaches to sexuality for praise, for example:

'[What went well was the] open sharing of knowledge and experience, simplified explanations of difficult concepts like "fiqh", "hadith", etc.; many examples.' (London attendee, November 2013)

'Qur'anic interpretation and knowledge about the context was really important in making it easier to discuss the issue with other people, be they Muslims or non-Muslims.' (London attendee, April 2014)

In their feedback, several attendees expressed a desire for more detailed information and strategies to talk to family, friends, Muslim communities and the wider public, for example:

'[I'd like a] debate/discussion session to brainstorm responses to FAQs from anti-LGBT people.' (London attendee, November 2013)

'[I would like] more time and scope to follow all the things we looked at further, to be able to bring the general [knowledge] into our personal situations [to encourage] supportive attitudes and different perspectives.' (London attendee, April 2014)

The feedback from these workshops covered similar concerns that some of my research participants expressed in several interviews. For clarification, there were overlaps between individuals who were my research participants and those who were workshop attendees – of my British research participants, three had attended the pilot workshop I ran in April 2012 before our interviews in 2013. Five research participants had attended subsequent workshops – either in London or Manchester – shortly before or after our interviews. The other four participants had never attended a full-day workshop either before or after our interviews. My research participants who had also attended Demystifying Sharia overwhelmingly expressed a desire to become familiar with more inclusive interpretations of Islam and were critical of conventional Islamic teachings on sexuality, as captured in the following quotes:

'[At the 2012 Imaan conference] I really loved [one of the presentations] on the hadith and how you shouldn't just take it as it says, which I did before, and I really liked that. That really got me thinking.' (Muna, female, early 20s)

'So it's really only like in the last couple of years where I've been able to kind of come to terms with what the Qur'an says and think about it in a different way, through reading books like *Homosexuality and Islam* by Scott Siraj al-Haqq Kugle and doing more research online and talking to people from Imaan.' (Ebrahim, male, early 20s)

The latter quote is significant because from resenting his childhood madrasa education where he felt he was not allowed to question anything, Ebrahim was now much more confidently articulating his personal beliefs. He had also redefined the idea of sinfulness in relation to his sexuality, based on his reengagement with the Qur'an:

I don't think Islam says very much, if anything. My understanding is that the verses about Prophet Lot in the Quran were about rape, and other crimes, and they've kind of been turned into talking about homosexuality. So I don't think there's anything wrong with homosexuality in the Quran.

Through my other conversations with Ebrahim and people like him, it was also clear that they were actively seeking another way of being LGBT and Muslim prior to encountering Demystifying Sharia. The workshop gave them the intellectual tools to continue with and deepen their own spiritual journeys and research into the religion. Waqqas, a gay British Pakistani in his mid-20s, said that the workshop helped his spirituality by building on his religious literacy and continued:

I can't separate being LGBT and Muslim. [In the past] I could press play on one, pause on the other. Now it doesn't work like that. Because the kind of Muslim I am is an LGBT Muslim. The kind of LGBT person I am is a Muslim LGBT person, you know, they don't exist independently anymore. And I get the same things from each. I get community from both. I get empowerment from both.

Waqqas's assertion that he gets not only a sense of individual identity but 'community' and 'empowerment' from being both LGBT and Muslim makes sense because many heterosexual Muslims are also seeking alternative viewpoints on sexuality. This is why I personally have also forged deep professional and personal connections within organisations such as the Muslim Institute, the Inclusive Mosque Initiative and New Horizons in British Islam. In fact, these three organisations took publicly pro-LGBT positions in the wake of the Orlando massacre.

I observed that the LGBT Muslim attendees who engaged in the Demystifying Sharia workshops more actively were also similarly more confident in forming new networks and addressing new audiences among other British Muslim groups. Some participated in panel discussions at the City Circle, a British Muslim charity, while others (coordinated by me) jointly organised a two-day conference on diversity in Islam with the Muslim Institute – both in 2014. Among these new networks, these Demystifying Sharia 'graduates' were able to employ their newfound confidence and religious literacy to argue for pro-LGBT interpretations of Islam. Their ability to articulate their positions using sound concepts and examples from within the Islamic tradition also appeared to inspire the more sympathetic individuals within these other Muslim networks to become more confident LGBT allies.

## Why pay attention to LGBT Muslims?

The Demystifying Sharia workshops are simply one example of how LGBT Muslims are drawing upon Islam – primarily diverse interpretations of its central texts and jurisprudence – to challenge conventional Islamic teachings that forbid or condemn homosexuality. These LGBT Muslims do this by engaging with these primary religious sources themselves, largely bypassing traditional Islamic authorities. Kugle (2003) acknowledges that he is inspired by Islamic feminism in the US while I had also been exposed to the Islamic feminism of SIS in Malaysia. On their part, SIS's activists and researchers had gathered their knowledge by consulting Islamic jurists and other scholars of Islam with alternative views from the West, Iran, the Arab world, sub-Saharan Africa, the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia. There is therefore a connection between the activism of groups like SIS in Malaysia and how some Demystifying Sharia 'graduates' have gone on to engage with other Muslim activists and organisations in Britain to collaborate and to promote more inclusive expressions of Islam. So-called marginal groups such as LGBT Muslims can therefore contribute to and influence larger transnational debates on Islam.

The case of Demystifying Sharia also illustrates the overlapping international networks of Muslim scholars, activists and (to a lesser extent) leaders who are producing alternative understandings of Islam that embrace gender equality and sexual diversity. These alternative Muslim networks engage in what Beckford (2000: 169) refers to as 'less formal, more diffuse, less exclusive, more inclusive, less homogeneous and more diverse mobilisations of ideas, sentiments, commitments and material resources in the name of religion'. Active Demystifying Sharia 'graduates' are part of this larger progressive Muslim milieu, creating and drawing upon their vision of Islam as a 'universal' religion to advocate for more 'particularistic' concerns about sexual diversity. In doing so, they engage with Islam as a 'cultural resource' (Beckford 2001: 233) to reconcile their personal religious and sexual identities, which are in turn part of their larger perspectives on equality, human rights and justice. Nevertheless, these reinterpretations do not necessarily entail a clear break with tradition – many LGBT Muslims and their allies continue to draw upon the wisdom and diversity that can be found in classical Islamic scholarship. In particular, they are mindful that 'the ways in which jurists have related source texts to social contexts demonstrates that the law they constructed has "always already" been subject to acts of interpretation' (Ali 2012: 154).

I would contend that the Demystifying Sharia workshops were an example of how this use of religion as a 'cultural resource' can take the form of an 'educational project' (Freire 1996: 36). In these workshops, alternative interpretations of Islam became the basis for 'critical reflection' and 'action' amongst many of the LGBT Muslim attendees (Freire 1996: 109). These LGBT Muslims then utilised their increased religious literacy to engage in fresh dialogue with other Muslim activists and to challenge dominant understandings of Islam on gender and sexuality. In a way, these workshops shared several characteristics of what Freire (1996) refers to as the 'pedagogy of the oppressed'.

I must clarify that this handful of workshops only reached a small proportion of LGBT Muslims in certain areas of England. I am still investigating the factors that enabled these particular individuals to access the workshops and what would have hindered or discouraged others – social class is certainly one clear factor. Many of my participants, although coming from working class family backgrounds, were university-educated and/or in middle-class professions, which allowed them greater freedom of movement and autonomy from their families and communities. This gave them easier access to the workshops. Even among those who did attend, some remained uncomfortable with the more critical aspects of Demystifying Sharia, perhaps due to their own strong understandings of Islam but perhaps also because of what Freire (1996, 29) terms the ‘fear of freedom’. Furthermore, because of limited resources, the workshops could only run for a single day – there was thus never enough time to sustain deeper and more detailed discussions about other connected issues. However, from my perspective, the workshops still operated as a ‘dialogue’ between ‘teacher’ and ‘students’ as far as was possible, in which the ‘teacher presents the material to the students for their consideration, and re-considers [his or] her earlier considerations as the students express their own’ (Freire 1996, 62). In this article, I have highlighted the ‘students’ who utilised their new-found religious literacy to shape and strengthen fresh alliances advocating for expressions of Islam that embrace gender and sexual diversity.

## Final thoughts

I have told the story of Demystifying Sharia to illustrate one way that some LGBT Muslims are using Islam as a 'cultural resource' (Beckford 2001: 233) to promote more inclusive religious interpretations. By engaging seriously with the central Islamic texts and concepts to promote pro-LGBT expressions of Islam, the workshops are also 'educational projects' (Freire 1996: 36) aiming to challenge inequality. They have inspired some LGBT Muslim attendees to explore and forge more meaningful relationships with other Muslim activists and networks. They draw upon the wisdom and flexibility of the classical Islamic tradition, specifically the highly contextual ways that earlier Islamic scholars and jurists interpreted religious texts. In doing this, these LGBT Muslims and their Muslim allies sometimes bypass traditional Islamic authorities to advocate for fresh expressions of Islam. As Muna, a lesbian Pakistani in her mid-20s puts it:

I've always followed what I'm told, right, so if an imam says something, I believe him, because he's an imam....Now it's like, so what if he's an imam? I have the right to make my own interpretation, you know.

It could also be argued, however, that people like the Orlando shooter Omar Mateen are using Islam as a kind of 'cultural resource' to legitimise violence and homophobia. It could further be argued that Mateen and people like him are understanding and expressing Islam in ways that bypass the approval of traditional Islamic authorities and are contextualising Islamic texts in their own way. In fact, the majority of Islamic leaders condemn the IS and its supporters because their actions go against 'true' Islamic teachings. The rationale of these Islamic leaders is that while homosexual behaviour might be sinful, individuals should not take matters into their own hands in punishing LGBT people.

This juxtaposition of pro-LGBT Muslim activism and anti-LGBT violence in the name of Islam might make for an uncomfortable thought for many people. However, if we take the view that religion is increasingly a 'cultural resource', we get to understand and analyse the diversity within Islam and indeed in all religions more insightfully. This perspective also gives us a glimpse into how marginalised groups like LGBT Muslims can actually be inspired by Islam to seek social justice, for example through their 'educational projects' that bypass conventional Islamic authorities. In this Temple Tract, I have focused on how the LGBT Muslims who designed and participated in the Demystifying Sharia workshops draw upon but also improvise on existing scholarship on Islam. I have argued that they do this not only to reconcile their sexual and religious identities on a personal level but to advance interpretations of Islam that embrace sexual, gender and other forms of diversity.

**Notes:** This Temple Tract is adapted substantially from Shanon Shah. 2016. "Constructing an Alternative Pedagogy of Islam: The Experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Muslims." *Journal of Beliefs & Values*, 1–12. doi:10.1080/13617672.2016.1212179.

## Reflections

In light of the arguments above, consider the following questions:

- Why would some LGBT Muslims uphold their sexual *and* religious identities, given the way that Islam is so often perceived as homophobic?
- How can we explain the fact that some observant heterosexual Muslims have chosen to become LGBT allies?
- What are the similarities between the experiences of LGBT Muslims and LGBT Christians in the West? How do factors such as social class, ethnicity and the wider political climate affect their experiences?
- What are the strengths in the approaches taken by LGBT Muslims to produce more 'inclusive' interpretations of Islam? What are the limitations?
- Where does the idea that Islam is exceptionally homophobic (or violent, or misogynistic) come from? Who benefits from this perception of Islam? Who is harmed by it? Whose influence would be undermined if this idea were to be debunked?
- Can religious doctrines change due to social action? Or do religious doctrines inhibit social change?

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