

Queer Jihad (I)

A View from South Africa

Scott Kugle

Muslims in Cape Town, South Africa, explore ways to be openly lesbian, gay, and transgendered and still be part of a muslim community. Advocacy groups there assert their place as interpreters of islam in a way that is open to diversity and engaged in a quest for justice.

Gay and *muslim*. Do those two words belong together? They belong together because they form the basic identity of actual people in muslim communities throughout the world. As one can imagine, such lives are a struggle - a queer jihad. 'Queer' is broader than the more technical term 'homosexual' and has been used in academic and advocacy discourse to denote lesbian, gay, and transgendered people who draw together into an alliance, each questioning patriarchal assumptions about what is normal, natural, and moral in human society. South Africa has a long-standing muslim minority community living under a new secular democracy. The South African constitution is decidedly progressive, and specifically protects citizens from discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender. The constitution was adopted in 1996, and by 1998 a group of muslims in Cape Town organised the first queer muslim support and advocacy organisation, Al-Fitra Foundation. This organisation has matured into The Inner Circle and has expanded to include branches in the major cities in South Africa. At their second annual islamic retreat in March 2005, I was privileged to meet thirty members of the organization and conduct interviews with some of them. Their stories place the legal and theological issues pertaining to queer communities in a much-needed depth of human experience.

The constitution of South Africa protects the right of citizens to practice their religion. It might appear that South African muslims who are gay, lesbian, or transgendered are empowered by their new constitution to assert their identity and rights. Yet most members of the muslim community interpret religious freedom as the right to regulate internal and community affairs according to islamic custom. For most queer muslims in Cape Town this has meant that when they 'come out' voluntarily or are 'outed' by force, they concomitantly leave their families and muslim community. They find little scope to play roles and live with dignity and honesty with their sexual orientation or gender identity within their religious community.

Muslim Youth Activism

Queer muslim activists are notably young (from 20-35) and have tended to clash with most of the elders of their communities and established institutions such as the muslim judicial counsel that speak for 'orthodoxy' in Cape Town. Many of them have endured censure,

abuse, and sometimes violence or its threat, often without recourse to protection from the state despite its progressive constitution.

Most pre-modern muslim religious authorities asserted that homosexual sex (whether between two men or between two women) is prohibited by islamic law. In the modern context, most go further to declare that homosexual orientation (as a personal understanding of one's self through emotional and psychological forces) is sinful and reprehensible.

Support groups like Al-Fitra Foundation and The Inner Circle contend that this condemnation is based more on patriarchal presuppositions than upon a clear reading of scriptural texts, especially the quran. They, along with feminist and pro-democracy activists, are contributing to an alternative vision of islam that is not based on patriarchal values.

This project is made even more urgent by two forces for social change that are pulling the muslim communities in South Africa in contrary directions: the AIDS pandemic, and the push for muslim personal law. The organisation, Positive Muslims, calls for an islamic 'theology of compassion' that refuses to stigmatize people, such as these suffering from HIV and AIDS, with conventional moralism (see the Positive Muslims website www.positivemuslims.org.za). Queer muslims join them in defining what an islamic theology of compassion might be, especially in regard to sexuality, sex education and health, and sexual ethics. They raise the possibility of islamic same-sex marriages (with great disagreement of whether this would be called *nikoh*), the islamic legal permissibility of 'civil partnerships' (for South African law treats homosexual and heterosexual partners with no distinction), and the risks of promiscuity. Such controversial topics are threatened by the push to have the South African state officially recognize muslim personal law, based upon the classical sharia governing family, marriage, divorce, and inheritance, as the defining feature of the islamic community. (2)

Queer muslim support groups function at many levels. While members of such activist groups may be small in number, this does not mean their impact is small. Even as they grapple with what a non-patriarchal islam might be like, activist muslims who are lesbian, gay, or transgendered are certain that it can exist. They faithfully assert that it will be a recovery of true islam, or at least a progressive islam and join a long tradition of liberation theology centred upon the koran which has been especially strong in post-apartheid South Africa.

Reinterpreting Religious texts

Muhsin Hendricks of the first Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered, Queer and Questioning Muslims (LGBTQ) support group in Cape Town in 1998 was one of the founders of Al-Fitra. The name Al-Fitra, an Arabic term meaning one's 'original and essential nature', points to the core philosophy of the group. Fitra is used in the koran to describe how god created all things, distinct in their individuality yet making up a harmonious whole. *So set your face toward the moral obligation in a true way, according to the original nature granted by God, upon which God fashioned people, for there is no changing the creation of God! That is the original and steadfast moral obligation, but most of the people do not understand.* (koran, surat al-rum 30:30) Traditional theologians read such a verse dogmatically, to assert that islam is the 'original and steadfast' religion, *al-din al-gayyim*, which uniquely conforms to the requirements of human nature that is the same for all people. However, LGBT muslims read it differently (though just as literally!) to assert that god creates each being with an original nature that cannot

be changed, and that the 'original and steadfast' religion is to return to god in harmony with one's inner nature. They hear the quran affirm this, even if living and worshipping in accord with their inner nature is in contradiction with the surrounding society, as *most of the people do not understand*.

Muhsin serves as spiritual advisor and organizer, saying, 'homosexuality is not just about sex. We have very spiritual people among us. I pray five times a day, read the koran, fast, and attend mosque regularly'. Along these lines the group employs certain organisational practices of the Muslim Youth Movement (MYM) founded in 1970. It organises lectures on sexuality and spirituality, weekly *halaqat* or small-group discussions, and *dhikr* sessions of meditative chanting (a sufi practice that is central to islamic practice among Cape Town's muslims). It also makes full use of the internet to provide spiritual and social counselling while protecting anonymity in an unprecedented manner.

Most LGBT muslims assert that their sexual orientation and gender identity are essential components of their personality: either an innate quality they were born with, or an unalterable character from childhood before rational cognition. Muhsin affirms that he was born with a same-sex sexual orientation, knew he was different from the age of five, though 'was sixteen before I realized they called it gay, and came out of the closet years later, at 21'. His story confirms a common pattern of a disturbing feeling of difference that sets one apart in childhood long before it can be recognised in concepts, articulated in language, or accepted in one's heart. For LGBT muslims like Muhsin, spiritual growth is a protest of stripping away the sense of having a 'false self' that is imposed by family, society, and religion, in order to free a 'true self' through which they can sincerely turn to god.

Coming out

Nur, a member of Al-Fitra, recollects the interval struggle and liberation that accompanied his decision to 'come out'. He recalls, 'I came out to my mother when I was 28, which for me was like a rebirth... I was born into my truth, whereas before I was living someone else's truth, their truth'. Nur's comment captures a paradox: his search for truth is driven by religious belief yet appears to be in conflict with conventional religious morality. He continues, explaining, 'I had in my 24-27 year period a great turmoil within myself, between my homosexuality versus me wanting to be god-fearing, or perceiving myself to be god-fearing... But before I could sit [my mother] down, I had to sit myself down! In front of the creator. Not for islam, not for my family, but for me. For my internal health.'

The quran rises above conventional islamic mores and speaks to the existential search for a path toward living sincerely according to one's own inner dispositions: *Say, 'O Lord, allow me to enter in sincerity and to leave with sincerity, and make me draw close to you with the authority of divine aid. And say, 'Truth has come and falsehood melts away - truly falsehood is insubstantial!'* We reveal with the koran that which provides healing and compassion to those who believe, but this only increases the oppressors in loss... *Say, 'Each lives by his own disposition, thus your Lord knows who is guided along a right path.* (koran, surat al-isra 17:80-84) This is exactly what Nur implied when he spoke of sitting himself down in front of the creator in sincere honesty. 'It's like looking in the mirror and coming clean - no lies. Truth. I only have one life... I always felt that if I should die or my mother should die, I would never forgive myself if I hadn't have told her, and come

clean with my creator and with her.'

While some keep this search for a true self hidden out of fear, others face the difficulty of a bewildered family and often hostile community. Muhsin relates that by age 28, 'it was very hard, but the conflict within me was so great that I had to tell them the truth'. Others come out at a much earlier age. Nafeesa, a transgendered person who was raised as a boy but now considers herself a woman, wears *hijab* to the mosque and prays in the women's section. She calls herself a typical coloured girl raised in the Cape Flats, but in the body of a boy. She was in denial until fourteen, accepted her sexual attraction to men at sixteen, and came out to her parents as 'gay' at eighteen, soon after which she began to wear women's clothes and changed her self-assessment to transgendered rather than simply gay. 'When I was eighteen and coming out my mother just didn't know how to handle it. She wanted to get me an arranged marriage. I said, "Hell no, darling! Over this dead body! I would rather kill myself". I'd rather lower my *iman* [faith] and kill myself than do something like that. I said, "you wouldn't like your daughter to be embarrassed, hurt, crushed every second night by her husband who behaves like a moffie [an effeminate gay man in Cape Town slang]... or catch her husband in her own wedding dress!"' Not everyone in the support organisation is as brash as Nafeesa or as bold as Muhsin; lesbian women, in particular, face hurdles asserting themselves as independent women above and beyond struggling for dignity with their sexual orientation.

Gay Muslim Outreach

Al-Fitra Foundation has merged with a separate organisation based in Johannesburg, Gay Muslim Outreach, which had been more social in orientation and less spiritual, and has emerged as The Inner Circle, with branches in Cape Town and Johannesburg, and with plans to open a branch in Durban. It joins an international network of queer muslim support organisations including Al-Fatiha in the USA, Salam Queer Community in Canada, Imaan in the UK, the Yoesuf Foundation in the Netherlands, and Helem in Lebanon. They focus on building confidence, creating support groups, raising consciousness, and encouraging *ijtihad* in the interpretation of religion and law. The Inner Circle believes that being a South African based organisation with a muslim constituency, it is uniquely placed to advance the international debate harnessed by South Africa when it became the first country to safeguard the freedom from discrimination based on sexual orientation in its Bill of Rights. Accordingly, The Inner Circle is an advocate for a minority within minorities along a three-dimensional plane-gay and muslim, while simultaneously offering the world the 'unique South African experience' (www.theinnercircle-za.org).

It is not certain whether lesbian, transgendered, and gay muslims can help create a more open and accepting atmosphere in Cape Town or wider South Africa. However, they will certainly create for themselves a social niche in which they can practice islam in ways that grant them dignity. Whether or not they are recognised by other muslims as equal partners in faith, they will highlight the need for muslim communities towards placing an ethical focus on sexuality.

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Note

- (1) This article was published earlier in: *ISIM Review*, 16, Fall 2005.
- (2) Abdulkader Tayob (1999), 'The Function of Islam in the South African Political Process: defining a community in a nation', in: A. Tayob & W. Weisse (eds.), *Religion and Politics in South Africa: from Apartheid to Democracy*, Waxmann Verlag, Münster / New York.