

Islam, Sexuality, and Language

I've noticed an ongoing thread in today's (mostly English-speaking) discourse and it's the idea that one can be Muslim and be gay so long as one controls their desires. The idea being that one cannot be blamed for being born gay (as that is outside of their control). However, one can be accounted for their deeds and their decision to act upon their desires. Hence, the gay Muslim must control their queer desires and avoid the sin of homosexual relations.

The problem in this line of thinking is clear to most Muslims. We understand from the Qur'an and *Sunnah* that Allah (swt) creates all humans in a state of *fitra* (purity). In the Noble Qur'an, Allah (swt) says, **﴿فَأَقِمْ وَجْهَكَ لِلدِّينِ حَنِيفًا فِطْرَتَ اللَّهِ الَّتِي فَطَرَ النَّاسَ عَلَيْهَا لَا تَبْدِيلَ لِخَلْقِ اللَّهِ ذَٰلِكَ الدِّينُ الْقَيِّمُ وَلَكِنَّ أَكْثَرَ النَّاسِ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ﴾** **“So be steadfast in faith in all uprightness (O Prophet) – the natural (*fitrat*) Way of Allah which He has instilled in all people. Let there be no change in this creation of Allah. That is the Straight Way, but most people do not know”** [TMQ Surah Ar-Rum 30:30].

So how can it be accepted that one is born gay i.e. in a state that is inclining them towards sin? How can one reconcile the idea of being born gay with the idea of being born in *fitra*?

I'd like to suggest a reason for why Muslims today are falling into this conceptual predicament and I think it's because of the way Muslims have adopted the English language and the concepts (*mafahim*) embedded in it.

Many scholars in the West have written about the history of the word “gay” and related terms such as “queer”, “lesbian”, and “homosexuality” in regards to how they emerged in the West and became embedded in Western languages such as English. The main argument is that how the West understands sexuality and the terms it has created to capture this understanding is not something that has always existed throughout time and across places. Instead, these ideas were created at a specific time and place.

In his book, *Islam in Liberalism*, Professor Joseph Massad summarises the discussion as follows: *“The important understanding that sexuality is a historically and culturally specific epistemological and ontological category and is not universal or necessarily universalizable – this includes sexuality’s derivatives, homosexuality and heterosexuality (and bisexuality), whose consolidation as medical, juridical, and later social categories in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Western Europe and the United States is their hallmark, and heterocentrism, heterosexism, and homophobia as socially and culturally specific companions to these developments at the level of ‘Western’ ontology”*.

The idea is this: the word “gay” is used to invoke a specific Western understanding of the human and human nature. It's the idea, Professor Massad later explains, that humans are subjects of desire and those desires constitute their identity i.e. who they are. He writes, *“But if sexuality has a specific European history, even though, as Kobena Mercer and Ann Laura Stoler have demonstrated, this history is an effect and a product of European colonial encounters and is imbricated with the category and epistemology of race, the epistemological and ontological implications of the term are not easily transportable much less translatable to non-European contexts. Also, Foucault’s caveat that the appearance of the term ‘does not mark the sudden emergence of that to which ‘sexuality’ refers,’ undermines a good part of his*

project, as ‘sexuality’ here, or its history, seems to signal not a new regime of subjectivity tout court but also, as Greg Thomas put it, ‘a more comprehensive genealogy of desire of which the contemporary sexual formation is simply one part.’ Thus becoming a ‘subject of sexuality,’ according to Foucault, is simply the most recent mode of how ‘Western man’ had conceived of himself as a ‘subject of desire,’ rather than signaling the emergence of a classed and racialized and racially supremacist Western subjectivity more generally”.

Professor Massad mentions race in this paragraph to clarify a certain point: when Western colonialists went around conquering people, they categorized them based on what they believed these people to be like i.e. what their nature was. So for the Western colonialists, being “gay” is akin to being a “black man”. It is who you are. It is your identity. It’s in your biology and your very being.

It is this connection between sexual desires and “who you are” that leads many Muslims to accepting that one is born gay. If you exhibit homosexual desires, that is who you are intrinsically and you cannot be changed the same way a black man cannot be made white.

It appears imperative then for Muslims to re-evaluate the Western concepts that have been adopted and consider what Islam has to say about human nature. As mentioned previously, humans are born in a state of *fitra*. And it is the nature in which Allah (swt) made us that men find companionship in women and vice versa. Allah (swt) said, ﴿وَمِنْ آيَاتِهِ أَنْ خَلَقَ لَكُمْ مِنْ أَنْفُسِكُمْ أَزْوَاجًا لِتَسْكُنُوا إِلَيْهَا وَجَعَلَ بَيْنَكُمْ مَوَدَّةً وَرَحْمَةً إِنَّ فِي ذَلِكَ لَآيَاتٍ لِقَوْمٍ يَتَفَكَّرُونَ﴾ **“And among His signs is that He created for you from yourselves mates that you may find tranquility in them; and He placed between you affection and mercy. Indeed in that are signs for a people who give thought”** [TMQ Surah Ar-Rum 30:21].

But of course, in spite of being born in *fitra*, humans can be tempted towards sin. Thus, our father Adam (as) was tempted by Shaytaan to eat from the forbidden tree. A sin, repeated more than once, can become a habit. Thus, a person can start habitually drinking alcohol or consuming psychotropic substances. However, it is critical to understand that falling victim to forbidden desires does not suggest anything about a person’s unchanging nature. Meaning, a person who drinks alcohol regularly is not doomed to be an alcoholic forever. It is not as if the action of drinking is embedded in his being and cannot be changed.

Understanding this is important in understanding the way Islamic scholars in the past viewed sin and how they developed a language to transmit their understanding. The focus is on the action itself without suggesting that the action is reflective of a person’s identity or who they are. Thus, the Islamic scholars used the word “liwat” (sodomy) and “sihaq” (for it’s female equivalent) to draw focus on the forbidden act and the one who commits this action is referred to as “luwtee” (sodomite). However, it is incorrect to assume that the word “luwtee” can be translated into “gay” because the word is intended to focus on the action itself and not to suggest anything about the nature of the person. This is the same as referring to someone who drinks alcohol as an alcoholic and the one who murders a murderer. And in all cases, the one who commits the forbidden act (whether that be sodomy or alcohol consumption or murder) can be reformed. Allah (swt) said, ﴿إِنَّمَا التَّوْبَةُ عَلَى اللَّهِ لِلَّذِينَ يَعْمَلُونَ السُّوءَ بِجَهَالَةٍ ثُمَّ يَتُوبُونَ مِنْ قَرِيبٍ فَأُولَئِكَ يَتُوبُ اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِمْ وَكَانَ اللَّهُ عَلِيمًا حَكِيمًا﴾ **“Allah only accepts the repentance of those who commit evil ignorantly then repent soon after – Allah will pardon them. And Allah is All-Knowing, All-Wise”** [TMQ Surah An-Nisaa:17].

“Soon after” was understood by the scholars to mean “before death”.

It is this understanding of *fitra* and desire which is the reason for why scholars in the past viewed same-sex attraction as a perversion of the natural state Allah (swt) made us in. It was understood that men who developed an attraction to young boys (pederasty) did so because of the feminine features of the young boys (being beardless and having high-pitched voices).

Imam al-Nawawi (d. 676 AH) said, وكذلك يحرم على الرجل النظر إلى وجه الأمد إذا كان حسن الصورة، سواء كان بشهوة أم لا، سواء أمن الفتنة أم خافها، هذا هو المذهب الصحيح المختار عند العلماء المحققين، نص عليه الشافعي، وحذاق أصحابه - رحمهم الله تعالى -، ودليله: أنه في معنى المرأة، فإنه يُشتهي كما تشتهي، وصورته في الجمال كصورة المرأة، بل ربما كان كثيرٌ منهم أحسن صورةً من كثيرٍ من النساء، بل هم في التحريم أولى لمعنى آخر: وهو أنه يتمكن في حقهم من طرق الشر ما لا يتمكن مثله في حق المرأة. “Similarly, it is forbidden for a man to look at the face of a handsome beardless youth (*amrad*), whether the look is accompanied by desire or not, and whether one feels safe from temptation (*fitnah*) or fears it. This is the correct and preferred opinion among the verifying scholars. It was explicitly stated by al-Shafi'i and the leading scholars of his school (may Allah have mercy on them). The evidence for this is that a beardless youth resembles a woman in this respect: he may be desired just as a woman is desired, and his beauty may resemble that of a woman. Indeed, many such youths may be more beautiful than many women. In fact, the prohibition is even stronger in their case for an additional reason: attachment to them may lead to forms of evil that are not possible in the case of women” (*Sharh Sahih Muslim*, 4/31).

Thus, you will see today the way gay people behave – how they train their voices to be more feminine and adopt feminine manners. This is nothing more than a perversion of the natural state that Allah (swt) made in us.

Returning to the earlier point of language, the point is to emphasise the need for Muslims today to understand the concepts that Westerners adopted and transmitted through their language. Rather than allowing these concepts to influence their thinking, Muslims must study their *Deen*, adopt its concepts, and speak the language that transmits these concepts. We must understand that viewing someone as “gay” is to fail to understand what Allah (swt) tells us about how He created us and how we can be reformed and guided away from sin. Allah (swt) said, ﴿لَهُ مَعْقَبَاتٌ مِّن بَيْن يَدَيْهِ وَمِنْ خَلْفِهِ يَحْفَظُونَهُ مِنْ أَمْرِ اللَّهِ إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يُغَيِّرُ مَا بِقَوْمٍ حَتَّى يُغَيِّرُوا مَا بِأَنْفُسِهِمْ وَإِذَا أَرَادَ اللَّهُ بِقَوْمٍ سُوءًا فَلَا مَرَدَّ لَهُ وَمَا لَهُمْ خَلْفُهُ يَحْفَظُونَهُ مِنْ أَمْرِ اللَّهِ إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يُغَيِّرُ مَا بِقَوْمٍ حَتَّى يُغَيِّرُوا مَا بِأَنْفُسِهِمْ وَإِذَا أَرَادَ اللَّهُ بِقَوْمٍ سُوءًا فَلَا مَرَدَّ لَهُ وَمَا لَهُمْ خَلْفُهُ يَحْفَظُونَهُ مِنْ أَمْرِ اللَّهِ﴾. “For each one there are successive angels before and behind, protecting them by Allah’s command. Indeed, Allah would never change a people’s state of favour until they change their own state of faith. And if it is Allah’s Will to torment a people, it can never be averted, nor can they find a protector other than Him” [TMQ Surah Ar-Ra’ad 11].

I hope this article has helped to clarify some matters and perhaps assist Muslims in their discussions with others on the topic of sexuality and Islam.

تقبل الله منا ومنكم

Taqabbalallahu minna wa minkum.

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