

Afterword

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Like many other LGBT+s who grew up in Muslim families, I never questioned the notion that non-heterosexuality and Islam were incompatible. This was, after all, what I heard from all the Muslims I knew – from family members, religious teachers, and strangers alike. If indeed Islam unambiguously condemns homosexuality, as I and many similarly oriented friends and acquaintances believed, then there could only be three options: reject Islam, repress our sexuality, or compartmentalize these two seemingly contradictory parts of our identity. In my experience (and based on a likely unrepresentative sample of queer Muslims I encountered in my late adolescence and early adulthood in Singapore), the third option was predominant. How many times have I seen in a gay bar on Saturday night the same person I saw on Friday afternoon at the *masjid*? How many times have I been this person? Those of us who were able to compartmentalize ethno-religious identity and sexual practice had adopted a sort of personal “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy with ourselves. We would live out two different lives, become two different people, and frequent two different worlds, keeping these two existences as separate as possible and deferring any meaningful reflection on our compartmentalized lives.

I also encountered older queer Muslims who had spent years – or even decades – in the proverbial closet, repressing their sexuality, keeping up appearances, often to tragic outcomes. One such closeted man was married with children, no longer intimate with his wife, seeing other men, while still experiencing self-hatred, and being blackmailed by a relative who stumbled upon his Grindr profile. He confided to me that he felt like he was living in hell. Though the experiences of other repressed queer Muslim acquaintances were relatively less dramatic, all of them shared the same kinds of fears, anxieties, and dilemmas related to the threat that their sexuality posed to their ethno-religious identity and community belonging. What makes this group different from the “compartmentalizers” is that the latter, while segregating two presumably incompatible aspects of their identity, were “out” to themselves, while the former remained closeted with themselves and with others.

Finally, as an erstwhile believing Muslim and now an atheist, I am as well versed with the social experience of rejecting Islam as I am with the repression of and the compartmentalization of sexuality. It must, however, be emphasized that the decision to leave a religious social group is rarely easy

since these groups tend to be entwined with others (family and friends, for example) to which an individual is strongly attached. Especially in countries and societies where Muslims are a minority (such as in Singapore or in the Western world), leaving Islam can be akin to leaving one's community and support networks, *and* can also be perceived as turning one's back on their community. As an informant from an ongoing research project on ex-Muslims in Singapore told me, "They [his family] felt that they had been betrayed because religion is supposed to tie the family even beyond death." He added that an additional concern for his family was how the rest of the community would perceive them in light of his transgression. So while this particular informant chose to disclose his lack of faith and his dis-identification from Islam, many others either were not able to do so or chose not to do so because of the interconnected relationship between religion, ethnicity, community, and family. Thus, leaving Islam in order to fully embrace one's sexuality is not a viable option for many.¹

There is, however, a fourth option: reconciling non-normative sexualities and genders with (and within) the Islamic tradition. By the time I discovered scholarship arguing for the permissibility of homosexuality in Islam, I had already long lost any semblance of religious belief. Still, as a first-year undergraduate student in Boston in 2011, I found myself perusing the Islamic studies section of the university library. While no longer a believer, I retained a keen interest in Islam and Muslim societies, communities, and people. After all, Islam had been an important part of my life and, in some ways, remained long after I had ceased to believe in any god or religion. Thus, it was almost accidentally, while skulking around the university library looking for nothing in particular, that I stumbled upon Scott Kugle's *Homosexuality in Islam* (2010). Kugle's book was a revelation. Kugle convincingly demonstrates that the condemnation of homosexuality is not unambiguously supported by the Qur'an and that hadiths often quoted as justification for condemning and punishing non-heterosexuals are likely to be inauthentic. This was the first time I found myself confronted with the notion that homosexuality might be permissible from a religious Islamic perspective.

The floodgates had been opened and I began delving deeper into the subject. In my final year in Boston, I first discovered the work of

¹ I do not mean to suggest that the decision to leave Islam can be reduced to one's sexuality; clearly, it is a question of faith or lack thereof. Still, the perception that one's sexuality runs contrary to one's religion can be a factor in whether or not one loses faith. Plus, leaving the religion can sometimes result in both no longer being Muslim, while still *feeling* Muslim, which is to say to be an atheist, but still feel some degree of cultural connection with Islam.

Ludovic-Mohamed Zahed. It was in particular a 2013 televised debate on *Hondelatte dimanche* between Tariq Ramadan and Ludovic that caught my attention. I had long been familiar with Ramadan and, while I disagreed with him on several points, I admired his excellent oratory skills and knack for honing in on the cracks in the arguments of his interlocutors. Thus, I was all the more impressed with Ludovic's competent display. Ludovic adeptly and confidently marshalled a variety of sources to argue against what Ramadan took for granted, i.e. that Islam condemned homosexuality. The more I discovered Ludovic's ideas, the more intrigued I was by – and convinced of the importance of – his vision for a truly progressive and inclusive Islam. I contacted Ludovic a few weeks before Christmas 2013 to ask if he would be interested to come speak in Boston. He accepted enthusiastically. Within a couple of months, I had gathered funding from several departments and research centres at the university (as well as from the lovely people at the Greater Boston PFLAG) to organize a series of events on the subject of homosexuality and Islam. In April 2014, a week of lectures, seminars, and discussions on homosexuality and Islam took place at Boston University and MIT. Listening to Ludovic and other speakers I invited, including Denis Provencher, a professor of French Studies, and Ani Zonneveld, the founder and president of Muslims for Progressive Values, was a wonderfully educative experience for me and for the many attendees across several days that week.

However, the week of *Rethinking Homosexuality in Islam* did not go by without incident. A few weeks earlier, an Algerian student had told me that he found the very idea of an event on Islam and homosexuality preposterous. "You cannot be gay and Muslim," he told me. I countered that plenty of people happen to be both, and that the reason I was organizing these events was to stimulate discussion on both the undeniable empirical reality and experiences of queer Muslims and the possibility of LGBT+-affirming interpretations of Islamic scriptures. My interlocutor was unconvinced and told me that he would attend the events and "grill" the speakers. In the end, he never turned up. However, a group of male Pakistani-American students did turn up to a lecture by Ludovic and interrupted him several times before I told them to save their questions for the Q&A session at the end. They, however, left soon after, presumably because they had already made up their minds on the topic and did not actually have any questions, but were simply seeking to interrupt and disrupt Ludovic's presentation. Nevertheless, the vast majority of attendees over the week took part enthusiastically and respectfully in academic discussions of Islam and homosexuality. Even so, there was a noticeable lack of Muslim attendees. Moreover, because I made it a point to speak and get to know the attendees, I realized that there

were virtually no heterosexual Muslim men – apart from the disruptive Pakistani-American students – at the events. Following Scott Kugle's advice to me some months earlier, I had personally invited the students of the Islamic Society of Boston University, but, in the end, it appeared that they did not want to engage with the notion of rethinking homosexuality in Islam.

Five years later, I still wonder if we are not preaching to the converted, as it were. Homosexuality remains a taboo and dangerous subject in the vast majority of Muslim countries and even in diasporic communities. Moreover, when the subject is addressed, the reference points are too often the likes of Mufti Menk, Zakir Naik, or even the relatively progressive (but still orthodox) Tariq Ramadan, and not truly progressive and inclusive Muslims such as Ludovic-Mohamed Zahed. Nevertheless, changing long-held biases and perceptions is a long-term project and its progress will be difficult to measure in the short-term. Even so, the sheer amount of publications, conferences, and other initiatives – by religious and/or academic scholars, activists, and “ordinary” citizens – on gender, sexuality, and Islam is heartening, and suggests an increasing visibility of queer Muslims that will, hopefully, continue to spark productive dialogues and conversations within Muslim communities about the place of gender and sexual minorities within Islam.

Speaking from personal experience, and from conversations with the people I have met at events on homosexuality and Islam, the work of someone like Ludovic (or Scott Kugle, Kecia Ali, Amina Wadud, or any number of inclusive Muslim scholars) has a positive impact on the lives of countless queer Muslims by progressively, incrementally carving out a space for them to live out their sexualities and genders within the Islamic tradition(s). When I invited Ludovic to Boston in 2014, no one in my department had heard of him. A professor asked his friend, a former French consulate cultural attaché, “Who does Ludovic represent [as a scholar of Islam and as an Imam]?” “Nobody,” the cultural attaché replied, implying that Ludovic (and by extension progressive and inclusive religious Muslims) was merely a drop in the ocean of unbending Islamic orthodoxy. My response, when this was conveyed to me, was that I had brought Ludovic to Boston precisely because the countless flesh-and-bone individuals that his work directly concerns are often dismissed as “nobodies.” If I have continued to collaborate with Ludovic ever since, it is because I know that queer people from Muslim backgrounds (whatever their level of practice and/or belief) are not “nobodies,” and that the work that academics and activists do can have a meaningful impact on their everyday lives by, for example, providing them with persuasive arguments that demonstrate the space for non-normative sexualities and genders in Islamic scriptures and throughout Islamic history.