

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].

