

Towards a Dialogue between Muslims and LGBTI people: pathways and pitfalls

Introduction

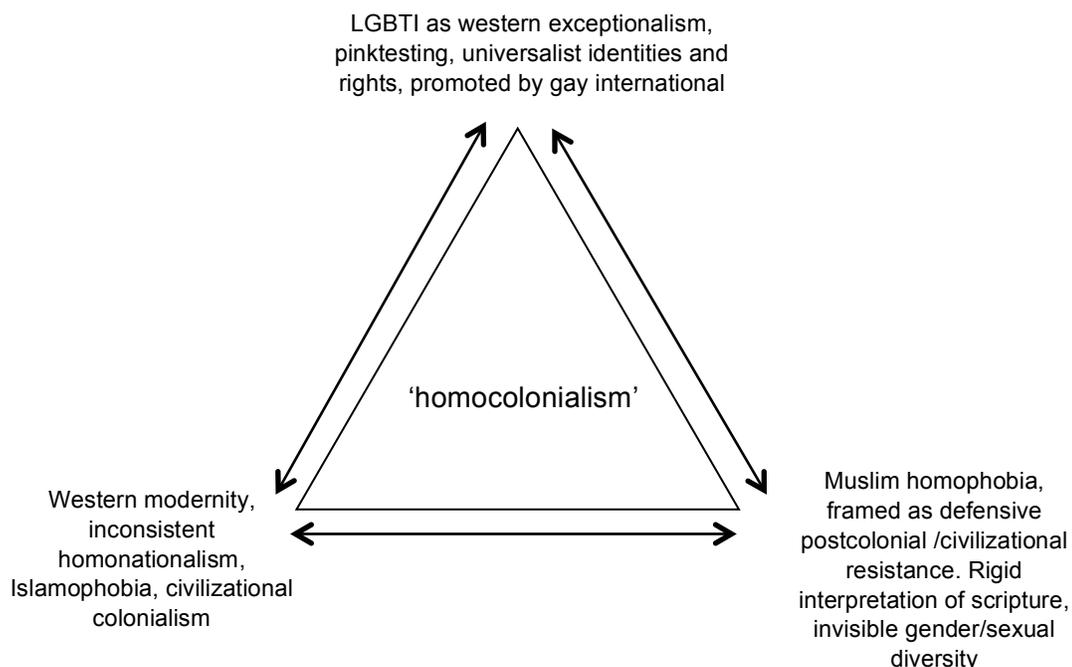
As Heiner Bielefeldt points out in his Introduction to this volume, the dominant political understanding of LGBTI and religion is one of absolute dichotomy. Islam is often seen as an extreme example of this opposition, with Muslim states at the forefront of resistance to international human rights of SOGI and enforcers of some of the most oppressive laws against LGBTI people. Furthermore, Muslim religious leaders often reiterate extremely negative views on sexual and gender diversity and both minority and majority Muslim populations express some of the most negative attitudes homosexuality in national and global comparison.¹ My aim in this chapter is to begin to map out a pathway that disrupts this dichotomy and points to potential routes to dialogue. My focus is on Muslim cultures and peoples but some points will have a wider relevance for managing the relationship between FORB and sexuality politics more generally. I also concentrate on the political rather than theology, insisting that we must take account of how religion is politicized and deployed politically.

I begin with my characterisation of the contemporary politics of Islam versus sexual diversity as a triangulation of *homocolonialism*, illustrating how LGBTI politics is caught up in the promotion of the civilizational superiority of western modernity, and thus opposition to SOGI becomes framed as resistance to western cultural colonialism. The remainder of the chapter is focused on how we challenge this political framing and I emphasize the power of an intersectional analytical framework in achieving this end. I begin with the need to highlight LGBTI Muslims as an identity that fundamentally disrupts the oppositional locations of LGBTI and Muslims and how we can support that disruptive power through building capacity for LGBTI Muslim autonomy and visibility. I then move on to discussing how other strategies focused on LGBTI groups and Muslim communities are also important in disrupting both the triangulated process of oppositions, and the dichotomous positioning within the triangulation model.

¹ See, for example, the global survey by the Pew Center, at <http://www.pewglobal.org/2013/06/04/the-global-divide-on-homosexuality/>, or the annual survey by ILGA at http://ilga.org/downloads/02_ILGA_State_Sponsored_Homophobia_2016_ENG_WEB_150516.pdf, both accessed October 6, 2016

The Triangulation of Homocolonialism

I begin with the ‘problem’ that we are facing, suggesting that this is best understood by acknowledging that LGBTI politics, Muslim homophobia and western modernity are part of a triangulated process of *homocolonialism*.²



This process of homocolonialism is primarily one of political positioning, with LGBTI politics deployed as the vanguard of western civilization’s development and progress, producing the ‘pinktesting’ of Muslim immigrants, refugee Muslim populations, and Muslim majority nations for their attitudes to SOGI rights. This discourse is based on western experiences but assumes a universalist, transcultural and transhistorical idea of what it means to be gay, lesbian, bi or trans. This positioning validates the exceptionalism of western modernity by suggesting that best examples of western civilization embrace SOGI rights and implies that these rights and identities

² This model draws on Puar’s concept of homonationalism, (2007: 1-36) and Massad’s critique of the ‘gay international’ (2008: 160-190) but pays more attention to Muslim homophobia and Islamophobia.

are possible *only* in western social and political formations. Even though the embrace is inconsistent across the west, it is that very inconsistency which requires LGBTI politics to be understood both as outside of the ‘core’ west, and as illustrative of its best version. This political vanguarding of SOGI rights by western politics - and international organizations that are seen as controlled by western agendas – is another point of the triangulation. The third position is Muslim culture and populations, distinct, *politically* outside of the west and its modernity, even when those populations are minorities *physically* within the west. These populations are uniformly characterized in opposition to the vanguard position of LGBTI identities.³

The positioning also produces a triangulated *process* which can be understood as a feedback loop that flows in both directions at the same time. The recent consolidation of LGBTI citizenship in the west (Hildebrandt, 2014) and the even more recent attempts to internationalize LGBTI provokes resistance from Muslim states, cultures and populations towards SOGI rights, often framed within a wider political discourse of resistance to western and international neo-colonialism. This resistance also depends upon rigid interpretations of Islam as a religion and renders invisible historical and contemporary forms of sexual and gender diversity in Muslim cultures. In turn, this resistance confirms the irredeemable characterization of Islam as a conservative religion and Muslim adherents as consequently too ‘traditional’ for the modern world. In this closed loop of triangulation, we can see how *both* LGBTI rights and Muslim homophobia are drawn into confirming Islamophobia, raising the central question for both groups of whether this is how they want their identities used.

An important point to remember is that this process of homocolonialism can be both intentional and unintentional. Many activists and policy makers working for LGBTI IGOS and governments are genuinely committed to the security and well-being of LGBTI peoples, but their actions may unintentionally contribute to and reinforce homocolonialism. This is a particular danger when we do not take into account the desires of the local populations that our actions are attempting to help. A major issue here is that, despite nods to cultural variations, most policy defaults into assuming that western identities and outcomes of equality are the ultimate policy aim. Of course, there are many examples, often in the service of Islamophobia, where reiterating this process is indeed intentional and that is something that we should counter or, at the very

³ For full evidence for these political manifestations see Rahman (2014).

least, dispute when it is being done in the name of LGBTI rights. On the Muslim side, there is also perhaps unintentionality, although this may seem less obvious given the evidence of widespread Muslim homophobia. Nonetheless, laying bare this triangulated process may open up some possibilities of acknowledgement that homophobia feeds Islamophobia and that may be a source of reflection and dialogue. There is, however, much evidence that this discursive framing of homocolonialism suits repressive and patriarchal Muslims leaderships in governments and religious communities because they can claim cultural or national legitimacy by resisting LGBTI rights as a western imposition. Thus, Muslim leaderships are not passive ‘dupes’ of homocolonialism; they have agency in how they participate in this process.

In the remainder of this brief discussion, I try to identify pathways that can disrupt the dichotomies of this process of homocolonialism. Overall, my approach in this reflection is to consider the process and positioning above, and to consider whether specific tactics and strategies reinforce this closed loop of triangulation or disrupt it.

LGBTI Muslim as Disruptive Intersectional Subjects

This triangulated process means that both Muslim postcolonial/religious resistance and western universalist LGBTI politics compound the assumption that there is *only one possible form* of sexual diversity, which has already been achieved in the west and is incompatible with Muslim cultures. This means that both the subject of LGBTI Muslims and the possibilities of LGBTI Muslim being and belonging are rendered invisible if not impossible. First and foremost, we must recognize the dangers of assuming that western LGBTI identity and politics are the only possible form of existing and living sexual diversity and thus avoid an unreflective and unintended homocolonialism. Therefore, a primary starting point for a pathway to dialogue between Muslims and LGBTI groups must be a focus on the visibility and experiences of LGBTI Muslims. Think for a moment if we positioned LGBTI Muslims in the centre of the triangle above: our very existence there would render the structure and flows of the triangulation untenable – it shatters the dichotomy to realize that there are, and always have been, people from Muslim cultures who have sexual and gender diversity. In this sense, LGBTI Muslims are an *intersectional* social and political identity – showing the connections and overlaps between apparently dichotomous cultures and peoples. Moreover, this is a challenge to *both*

Dr. Momin Rahman, 2016

western/international LGBTI groups *and* to Muslim cultures because a rigorous intersectional perspective demands that we recognise that the experiences of an intersectional identity are not ‘minority’ experiences within a dominant identity category, but are *fundamentally different and equally legitimate ways of being* that dominant identity (Rahman, 2010).

Operationalizing Intersectionality in the Movements Toward Dialogue

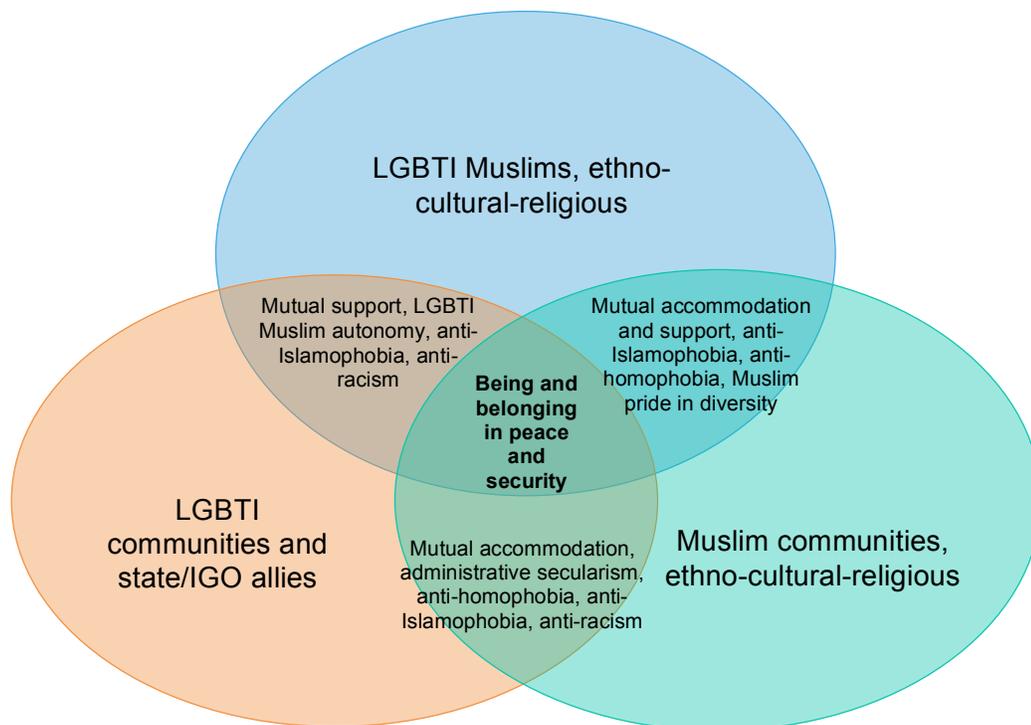
The issues of increasing the support for LGBTI Muslims illustrate a broader one of assessing tactics, which I suggest we can frame as a ‘homocolonialist’ test. There are three key steps in using this reflexive strategy. A first step in any decision making about policies should be whether we are reiterating the triangulation of homocolonialism or whether we are contributing to its disruption. Second, we need to make this assessment with a keen understanding of the complexity of the situation which is best understood as the intersectionality of the group we are ultimately attempting to support. Third, we need to think about the outcomes that such populations are looking for, being clear in resisting the vanity of our own assumptions about what their ‘equality’ will look like. In this sense, we should think of equality as a lived resource, entailing any actions or policies that enhance the capacity of being and belonging in peace and security. This is captured in the diagram overleaf and the remaining discussions expand on this visual representation.

LGBTI Support for LGBTI Muslims

In the current political climate, the research being done on Muslim homoeroticism and gender diversity is primarily possible in the west, as is the activism necessary to force visibility and political change. This should be supported and accelerated, as ILGA Europe is attempting with its support of the nascent European Queer Muslim Network.⁴ Governments should also pay

⁴ See the contribution from *Maruf* in this volume.

Operationalizing Intersectionality



attention to how best to fund autonomous groups of LGBTI Muslims that can build their own identities and interventions. There is a large and growing body of academic research on Muslim sexual diversity, and this contributes to raising contemporary visibility as well, as well as rendering visible histories of sexual diversity from Muslim cultures.⁵ Again, funding is always the issue for academic work, and so interventions here can be a huge help. Too many funding opportunities from governments or international organizations are focused on security, integration and radicalization when they are interested in Muslims. We need more attention, research and support for Muslim investigations of Muslim diversities. The pitfall here is, of course, that this kind of active financial and institutional support will more than likely be derived from western governments and sources, or IGOs that are seen as dominated by the west. But a question to consider is whether that matters if the longer term outcome is to ultimately contribute

⁵ See, for example, Babayan and Najmabadi (2008), Murray and Roscoe (1997)

Dr. Momin Rahman, 2016

to rendering Muslim sexual diversity more visible, more possible, in all Muslim cultures, thereby disrupting the triangulation.

Moreover, this is not just about external Muslim cultures since we know that in the west, there are established LGBTI organizations that have yet to fully consider the needs of LGBTI Muslims within their own communities. Furthermore, many LGBTI organizations are not fully engaged in an intersectional politics of anti-racism and anti-Islamophobia – issues that demand acknowledgement and action if the aim is to support LGBTI Muslims. The benefit of addressing these issues more directly is that they also support a potential dialogue between LGBTI groups and mainstream Muslim communities.

Dialogue between LGBTI and Muslims

In order to achieve dialogue, LGBTI politics in the west has to confront its troubled history with organized Christian religions. We cannot simply talk to ‘secular’ Muslim organizations or demand that Muslims be secular when the evidence on Muslim identity suggests an increasing adoption of a cultural identity that has religious practices at its centre. If religion is a primary identification of a particular group (usually but not exclusively ethnically based), then a robust multiculturalism in the west must include religious identification as much as it does gender, sexuality or race (Modood, 2013: 72-79) and we must also recognise this when dealing with Muslim majority nations and IGOs. LGBTI politics in the west has benefitted from secular anti-discrimination and citizenship policies and that fundamental principle of public policy is important. We must, remember, however, that this is an *administrative* secularism, focused on how people are treated by the state and other groups in public. All too often, LGBTI people and politics adopt an anti-religious view that defaults to an ideological secularism that demands that everyone become secular, or at least, privatise their religion. Putting religious people in the closet is not a productive pathway to dialogue. Not only does this potentially prevent the development of LGBTI Muslim religious discourses within Muslim politics but it lowers the likelihood of debate and change within Muslim communities on issues of sexuality and gender because it reduces multiculturalism to a focus on race and ethnic culture without acknowledging that culture may be infused with religious practices and beliefs. If religion is expressly excluded

from multiculturalism, then we have no room for dialogue within the practices and balancing of diversity that multiculturalism entail.

Taking administrative secularism as a base line in governance, there are still areas of common experience between Muslim minorities and LGBTI groups, not least of which is discrimination. Rights of non-discrimination are a fundamental part of the expansion of liberal equality towards social justice that feminism, gay liberation and ethnic politics have all helped to shape and there should be more discussion of the commonalities in political structures and policies that prevent homophobia *and* racism or Islamophobia. Too often Muslim groups are silent on the issue of homophobia, or vocal only in opposition to sexual rights, often in alliance with other religious groupings. Both the silence and the articulation of opposition in extreme ways has its consequences; when there are no Muslim voices articulating against discrimination and violence directed towards LGBTI communities, it is simple enough for those who wish to do so to use this position to compound Islamophobia. Can we imagine a Muslim position against homophobia that retains the right to disagree with the acceptability of homosexuality? In that this position would be much like the Vatican's, queer activists may disdain it, but accepting religious rights to disapprove of particular acts *within* the framework of a public politics that protects queers against discrimination is a reasonable outcome in multiculturalism and includes an obligation from Muslim politics to acknowledge the need to balance their cultural rights with the rights of others.

There are always limits in accommodating diversities, but, as Bielefeldt argues in his Introduction, the base line is non-discrimination, so religious freedom cannot be used to trump the non-discrimination rights of others. However, positively accommodating the religious basis of Muslim identity, combined with autonomous LGBTI engagement with anti-racism and anti-Islamophobia, will surely aid in signalling to Muslim populations that there is a common ground on which we can meet. Even if that dialogue results in a scriptural defence of Muslim homophobia, the tone and scale of that homophobia will be reduced if the rights enabling it are seen as part of the broader framework of diversity rather than existing as weapons of cultural defense that are outside of the dialogic requirements of multiculturalism.

Strategies from LGBTI groups that enhance these possibilities include their more principled engagement with intersectional oppressions of race and, in this case, Islamophobia.

Could we, for example, imagine campaigns that resist ‘pinktesting’ by identifying LGBTI politics against Islamophobia in the treatment of minority populations, potential immigrants and refugees? A ‘Queer Day against Islamophobia’ as part of the annual political calendar? Or Pride days devoted primarily to such specific causes, to raise consciousness and build alliances? These interventions, moreover, do not silence our ability to critique Muslim homophobia, but rather they encourage us to resist describing it outside of a wider context of Islamophobia and thus, I would argue, allow us more credibility to confront specific instances of Muslim antipathy to sexual diversity and provide more credible indications of an openness to cultural debate about human rights.

Moreover, accessing this terrain of dialogue may eventually produce positive results from the Muslim side of the discussion, which would be an acknowledgement from Muslim groups that sexual diversity is part of the spectrum of diversity that includes ethnic and religious pluralism, and thus it has as proper a place in public politics as Muslim consciousness.

This is a much more complex engagement when considering the international realm, given that many Muslim majority nations do not have a culture of secular administration or open civil societies and respect for minorities. Each case, moreover, will be different given the particular framework of laws, culture and visibility of LGBTI groups. Here, we may have to return to the first principle of the homocolonialist test and consider whether specific tactics are moving us onto a terrain of potential dialogue, or simply reinstating the oppressive triangulation. And *every* tactic must be up for scrutiny here, from the insistence on LGBTI rights as human rights, to threats of aid conditionality, to demands for decriminalization. This is not meant to suggest paralysis of action, but rather that if certain discourses and tactics are making the situation worse, then let’s think outside of the box on how to create dialogue and mutual accommodation, remembering, above all, that our ultimate aim to create security of being for LGBTI Muslims. So let us pluralize our concern for equality beyond ‘rights’ towards the material resources of equality in their local contexts. This might mean that capacity building for local groups is more useful than calls for decriminalization, for example, or that a broader debate

on the benefits of human rights is a more useful engagement than a repeated focus on LGBTI rights.⁶

This is not to abandon the international attempt to establish LGBTI rights as human rights, since there is evidence that the developing architecture of LGBTI rights can be woven into human rights and thus serve as a resource for many local movements (Lind, 2010; Lennox and Waites, 2013). However, many of these movements have also demonstrated the contradictions of dealing with universal expressions in local or national context (Lind, 2010), suggesting that we need to be more thoughtful about the full range of resources needed to flesh out the conditions of human rights, taking account of the intersectionalities of sexual subjectivity with, at the very least, class, culture and gender, and the political structures available (Boellstorff, 2012; Lind, 2010). In their analysis of LGBTI movements in the Commonwealth, for example, Lennox and Waites point to the national specificities of how movements have developed as far more important than international discourses or rights structures, even where the latter have been used as resources in the local context. Whilst being careful to limit the generalizability of their comparative analysis, they identify some broad common processes, primarily the building of alliances beyond exclusively LGBTI groups, and a concurrent legitimization of human rights within regional, rather than international, contexts (Lennox and Waites, 2013). If we are to continue promoting an international framework of rights, perhaps we can refocus efforts to engage more directly with regional, pan-Islamic, Asian and African rights bodies, as Langlois (2014) has suggested. At the very least, nation-specific strategies need to be thought through, requiring a lot of time, research and energy, for sure, but necessary nonetheless and potentially being developed soon through the UN's new independent expert on the rights of SOGI peoples. There is, of course, a problem in that attempting these expansions of strategies are, in the short term, confirming the triangulation of homocolonialism from IGOs. I am not sure that can be avoided in the immediate time frame, but the more these strategies become southern led and regionally led, the more they contribute to the longer term possibility of autonomous movements towards SOGI rights. This seems a particularly bleak and distant future in terms of Muslim majority countries right now, but each strategy is only one tool in a broader overall attempt.

⁶ See, for example, toolkits developed by the UK's Department for International Development at <http://www.spl.ids.ac.uk/sexuality-gender-faith>, accessed October 6, 2016.

There is as yet no common ground between Muslim IGOs emphasis on Islamic human rights and those of the UN in the area of sexuality but there has been some discussion of commonality when it comes to gender and of human dignity. Can we then, reformulate concepts to include the possibility of cultural diversity in sexuality and relate it to gender rights? Is human dignity a shared value here that might be open to productive contestations? This is a much longer term issue and perhaps requires the intersection of academic theorizing and policy, and that work, particularly when it demonstrates the diversities of sexuality and gender in non-western countries, is important. However, I would also caution against too much hope being placed on reformulating concepts of sexuality or looking for some alternate concept that permits dialogue. Yes, SOGI is seen as western but the issue at stake is not the concepts, but rather the *political significance* of sexual diversity as demonstrated in my model of triangulation. So the pitfall to avoid here is an attempt to reformulate concepts without challenging the political significance that SOGI has within the oppositional civilization discourse. Challenging that discourse should be the priority, and this will indeed include rendering visible the knowledge of sexual and gender diversity from Muslim cultures. This may open up the space to recognize culturally specific archives and their contemporary manifestations and that route to conceptual reformulation is productive, but much longer term. In the short and medium term, I am not sure that energy spent on conceptual reformulations avoids the political significance of SOGI identities and terminology that enables the resistance from Muslim cultures.

A final important point to consider for activists and state allies is whether there needs to be a strategy of private attempts to explore the possibilities of dialogue – something which is a common in first step in diplomacy and peace-building. For Muslim communities and leaderships (and perhaps even for some LGBTI groups and state allies), this option provides a respite from the triangulated process without the need to engage in a public defensive re-assertion of homophobia.

Dialogue between LGBTI Muslims and Muslim Communities

This final area of dialogue is, of course, the ultimate goal to all of the strategies discussed above. The Muslim route to such a debate is, however, presented with the obstacle of governments and leaderships that are heavily invested in a hetero-nationalism legitimized through Islam. In these circumstances, the development of LGBTI Muslim organization will rely heavily on the western LGBTI support and the transnational dialogues and strategies discussed in the previous sections and the pitfalls discussed above make the development of a *general* Muslim consciousness around sexual diversity highly improbable. Nonetheless, I think there is one strategy that we can adopt that may help, and that is asking Muslim groups to hear about, learn about and think about the experiences of LGBTI Muslims. The increasing body of research on these experiences and identities are fully intersectional, illustrating a concern with racism, Islamophobia as well as sexual identities. There is also a common theme that discusses the heartfelt anxieties of having to negotiate or choose between their Muslim identity and their sexual identity; a crisis of belonging both culturally and psychologically. Hearing about these issues, outside of a dichotomous framing, will hopefully show some common ground between Muslims and LGBTI Muslims, at the very least in terms of experiences of racism, Islamophobia and perhaps even the lack of an ability to feel proud, belong with pride to their cultures. Again, I think that any initial steps here may need to be private but that will depend on specific situations in each minority and majority country, or the diplomatic context of an IGO.

There are numerous pitfalls here too, focused around spiritual reformations, pluralism within Muslim communities and thought, and the overriding issue of ‘progress’. First, there is an emergent strand of religious reinterpretation around issues of sexuality, something that the evidence on lived experience demonstrates is important to many queer Muslims. Kugle’s work is the most sustained rethinking of the role of sexuality within Muslim spiritualism and he illustrates the many ambiguities that inform scriptural and legal reasoning often used to justify Islamic condemnation of homosexuality (2010), complemented recently by Jahangir and Abdullatif’s scriptural argument for same-sex marriage (2016). Both they and other queer Muslims are creating a body of scholarship that has already been a resource for Muslim queer organizations and this is a welcome development, but this has been hugely contentious for mainstream Muslims, partly because this scholarship speaks to broader concerns about the static

traditionalism of religion in Muslim life and, in particular, recognizing the historical and cultural context in which Islamic traditions and canons have developed. This is a contentious issue in any organized religion and it no doubt will remain so in Islam, particularly when there are widespread calls from western political voices for a ‘reformation’ in Islam that seems only to be a call for ‘modernization’ based on western experience (Safi, 2003: 15-17). However, although we must ultimately confront the ideological basis of the deployment of religion to serve a hetero-nationalism that legitimizes particular governments or community organizations, this may not be a productive issue in any first steps towards dialogue. I suggest, therefore, that these debates are not the subject of any initial attempt to render visible LGBTI Muslim experience to mainstream Muslim groups.

Letting go of an ideological version of Islam is difficult enough when it is seen as a defence against western Islamophobia, but it also raises the question of diversity within Islamic thought, traditions of practice and, more broadly, within Muslim communities. Safi frames this issue as pluralism and that chimes with many of the institutional and social factors that seem important in developing a queer visibility and politics discussed in the previous chapters. The institutions and civic traditions of western liberal capitalist societies may have unintentionally provided the impetus and space for queer emergence, rather than contained the principle of sexual liberation from their inception, but that does not dismiss the fact that plural, open forms of societies seem empirically to be the most productive for all forms of diversity. Again, many others have discussed the potential recovering of plural traditions within Muslim histories, but I want to focus on the one key issue of pluralism and diversity that relates most directly to sexuality and that, of course, the acceptance of gender equality. This is a more hopeful area of Muslim engagement, largely because there is a strong tradition of Muslim feminist thought and an increasing number of political and civil groups that focus on gender equality, such as Muslims for Progressive Values. We have seen, however, how the issue of gender equality is easily woven into oppositional dialectics, most brutally in the justifications of war and the scrutiny of Muslim immigrant populations (Razack, 2008) whereby its positioning is used to invoke both Islamophobia and Muslim ideological resistance. Nonetheless, the regulation of sexual and gender diversity is universally related to the maintenance of gender normativity, however culturally differentiated that normativity may be, and so this question of pluralism as gender equality fundamentally underpins any changes we might hope to see in Muslim sexualities. As

with sexual diversity politics, Muslims must continue engage with this issue ourselves if we are not to be subject to more uses of gender justice as a colonizing tactic. Thus, the challenge of sexual diversity may indicate a broader issue in Muslim consciousness, that it is time to think of different possibilities from within a confident, progressive Muslim identity, rather than to invest in the triangulation of western exceptionalism by oppressing gender and sexual diversity.

Conclusion: Toolkits without Blueprints

First and foremost, we must recognize the dangers of assuming that western LGBTI identity and politics are the only possible form of existing and living sexual diversity and thus avoid an unreflective and unintended homocolonialism. There is no one blueprint for how sexual diversity will be lived in various communities and cultures but there are tools that we can use to begin fleshing out the ‘shape’ of equality (Rahman, 2014) that is relevant for specific LGBTI Muslim communities. I argue that a primary starting point for a pathway to dialogue between Muslims and LGBTI groups must be a focus on the visibility and experiences of LGBTI Muslims that builds and funds LGBTI Muslim capacity for *autonomy*. Second, this capacity building requires a more rigorous and committed engagement from mainstream LGBTI groups with issues of intersectionality, primarily Improving LGBTI consciousness of racism, Islamophobia and *connecting* these to campaigns against homophobia.

We also need to engage with Muslim communities, and such strategies above should contribute to building *confident*, rather than defensive, Muslim communities who, as a first step, are willing and able to engage with shared experiences of discrimination. Ultimately, these dialogues will hopefully build the capacity within Muslim communities to engage with the *diversity* of Muslim traditions in gender, sexuality and, above all, Muslim identities and politics. In the current climate of homocolonialism, these may seem impossible goals, both with minority and majority Muslim populations, and with LGBTI organizations that are defending against extreme homophobia, but we need to find the strength to begin. Making the subject of LGBTI Muslims *possible* and *visible* is disruptive, but that disruption is the only route to a more productive engagement with these difficult dichotomies.

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