

Hope exists for LGBT Muslims



JUNAID
JAHANAGIR

Edmonton, despite Alberta's red-neck fame, is home to both the oldest North American mosque and the first North American Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) youth camp. Both the Pride Centre and Muslim Community act to support their respective members; however, it's nearly impossible to bring elements of both together owing to intransigence on the Muslim side, the limited resources of the LGBT, and the unwillingness of Muslim LGBT to reconcile the diametrically opposed facets of their existence.

It's not news to say that both sides are subject to discrimination and stereotypes. The American Muslim community has, at times, been wrongfully portrayed as potentially abetting heinous acts of terrorism, and on other occasions, you'll find messages that paint all queers as disease-infected child molesters.

Naturally, queer practicing Muslims weave a cocoon of restrictive pretence. Whereas the *hijab* or a beard expose them to the scrutiny of the general public, their refusal to marry unleashes the wrath of forbidding cultural traditions. But despite the barriers they face, there's still hope.

Western LGBTs have made great strides toward the integration and cementing of their rights in the post-2005 era of same-sex marriage. Affirming United Churches wed same sex couples, libraries have sections on queer literature, support groups provide

resources to LGBT parents, and academia works on cutting-edge queer theory. However, such achievements aren't shared by their Muslim peers, in whose lives words like "sodomy" overpower those like "heteronormativity."

Though the LGBT community has accomplished much, these successes mean little to practicing Muslim LGBT. The language of a tradition based on civic rights can't simply be used to address other cultural norms that employ the language of Classical Islamic jurisprudence.

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Fortunately, an alternative, yet mainstream, Muslim discourse exists that can be summoned to address the status quo in a firm yet respectful manner so that future generations of Muslim LGBTs won't face freezing silence from their faith-based family.

Indeed, a whole school of Muslim scientists deemed homosexuality as an inherited trait hundreds of years before the revolutionary American Psychological Association statements. Moreover, the strong opinions of revered scholars like Ibn Hazm and Abu Hanifa on the Qur'anic verses on the people of Lot (Sodom) who oppose the use of these verses for injunctions on homosexual conduct. Their opinions lend support to the alternate belief that the divine addressed violent rape as wrong, not loving same-sex unions.

Furthermore, in Islamic scriptures, there's an absence of any express directives in regard to same-sex unions. And if you begin to consider rules of Classical Islamic jurisprudence—such as "necessity trumps prohibitions" and "general rules always allow for exceptions"—they can be seen to form a strong counterweight against the rigid traditions, which scholarly work has estimated to be weak and concocted.

Given the above, one wonders if it would be too much to ask the mainstream clergy to address the plight of Muslim LGBTs. Perhaps this is why some mainstream Imams like the late Zaki Badawi have gone so far as to encourage gay Muslims to form chaste civil unions with their same-sex partners under British law. However, no North American Muslim scholar has as yet effectively addressed the subject—perhaps due to the more pressing concerns of a community that finds itself under duress from the Islamophobic generalizations within society at large.

Hope lies in the efforts of fringe queer Muslim groups like Salaam Canada, openly gay Imams like Daayiee Abdullah, and alternative groups like the Muslim Canadian Congress. Paradoxically, hope also lies in statements coming from religious discussions in Muslim countries like Indonesia. Recently, some moderate Muslim scholars have boldly stated that homosexuals and homosexuality are natural and created by God, and thus permissible within Islam.

Classical Muslim thought has within it the capacity for a discourse that is tolerant and respectful of queerness. And with more work, more voices, and above all the determination of Muslim LGBTs, it will only be a matter of time before mainstream Islam will support same-sex unions.

Media ignores bloody war in Congo



GREG
QUEYRANNE

Since 1998, more people have died in the war in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) than in any other conflict since WWII. In the nearly ten years since it began, the conflict and the humanitarian catastrophe it created has killed a total of 5.4 million people, with an estimated 45 000 dead every month, according to a new mortality survey produced by the International Rescue Committee—that's an average of 1500 deaths every day.

In spite of this astonishingly high mortality figure, few people know about what some have called "Africa's First World War."

In August 1998, the war was launched when Rwanda and Uganda, under the pretext of a Congolese rebellion, invaded eastern Congo in an attempt to overthrow President Laurent Kabila—himself installed by Rwanda and Uganda's 1996–97 invasion of what was then called Zaire, which overthrew the long-time dictator Mobutu. Angola, Namibia, and Zimbabwe came to the aid of the Congolese government as Burundi joined the invaders, producing an Africa-wide war, with all combat theatres on Congolese soil.

For years, half of the Congo—a country about the size of Western

Europe—was split in half, with Rwanda militarily occupying the east, Uganda the north, and the Congolese government and its regional allies controlling the west and south. Throughout this period, Rwanda and Uganda, along with its rebel counterparts, made millions of dollars by systematically exploiting the Congo's vast mineral wealth—especially gold, diamonds, cobalt, copper, and coltan. While Rwanda and Uganda removed their militaries from the DRC in 2002–03, they left behind a network of proxy rebel groups to continue the mineral exploitation.

Numerous multinational corporations have been found to be profiting from the conflict, since, as author Adam Hochschild has argued, they don't have to "worry about high taxes" and "prefer a cash-in-suitcases economy to a highly regulated one." The UN Panel of Experts goes further, saying that the "role of the private sector in the exploitation of natural resources and the continuation of the war has been vital. A number of companies have been involved and have fuelled the war directly, trading arms for natural resources," and adding that it considers "companies trading minerals [...] to be 'the engine of the conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.'"

Of particular importance is the exploitation of coltan—a mineral essential for our modern high-technology-based economy. Coltan is processed into capacitors, and due to its ability to conduct electrical charges, it's found in a wide range of consumer electronics such as cell phones,

laptops, DVD players, and video game consoles. It has also come to be known in some circles as "blood coltan," since much of the coltan in our high-tech gadgets comes from and has helped fuel the conflict in the Congo.

The effects of the war on women have also been horrendous. Throughout the conflict, women and girls have been the victim of extreme sexual violence. Yakin Erturk, special rapporteur for the UN Human Rights Council on violence against women, notes that the violent acts committed against women in the eastern province of South Kivu "are of an unimaginable brutality that goes far beyond rape." It's been estimated that in South Kivu alone, approximately 45 000 women were raped in 2005. As *The Guardian* reported in late 2007, "75 per cent of all the rape cases" that the medical charity Doctors Without Borders "deals with worldwide are in eastern Congo."

The continuing conflict in the Congo is the biggest war of this generation. While the media has focused its attention elsewhere, the conflict continues to claim an estimated 45 000 lives every month—even though the war has officially ended. With 5.4 million silently killed in nearly ten years, much of it fought over mineral resources such as coltan, Western consumers like ourselves must demand that our economy and consumer habits don't continue to fuel this war. As well, we must make sure that people know of this conflict so that it does not, as so many tragedies do, become a forgotten part of history.

FEATURED STUDENT GROUP FOR MARCH

THE COLLECTIVE BODY for ARTS STUDENTS



Purpose of the Group:

The Collective Body for Arts Students is the new Faculty Association for Arts undergraduates at the University of Alberta. In their first year of existence, CBAS has been instrumental in reaching out to the students they represent, and diligent in connecting to and advocating for the constituents. CBAS is always searching for new, innovative and meaningful forms of feedback. They have worked especially hard to form respectful, pragmatic and mutually beneficial relationships between students and faculty. A perfect example of CBAS' constructive relationships is evident in their work with the faculty to create a meaningful granting program for Departmental Associations and Arts-affiliated student groups to support their initiatives.

The Collective Body for Arts Students will continue making waves with the solid foundations they have set for future years as representatives for the student body. Their openness and enthusiasm has paved the way for a legacy of involvement, interaction and input for Arts students in their faculty.

WWW.UALBERTA.CA/~CBFORAS
CBFORAS@UALBERTA.CA
phone 492.5085 office 2-10 Humanities Centre

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