



'Loving beyond labels'

**Outcomes of the Spiritual Counselling Pilot Project
and evidence-based recommendations for supporting
Muslims of diverse sexualities, genders and intersex
status**

Dr L.S. Irving

Supported by:



'Loving beyond labels':

Outcomes of the Spiritual Counselling Pilot Project and evidence-based recommendations for supporting Muslims of diverse sexualities, genders and intersex status

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Dedication

This report is dedicated to every person who wishes to make our world a kinder, more compassionate place to live. It is our hope that the contents of this Report, as well as the Pilot Project that informs it, can help people achieve this aim.

This report is also dedicated to LGBTIQ+ Muslims everywhere. May we always draw upon each other's resilience for strength and reach out to support those who are struggling.

Acknowledgements

We acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which this report was written. They are the Wattamattagal people of the Darug nation. We would like to acknowledge the Elders of the Darug nation, past, present and future, and pay respect to them. May we all be granted with the capacity to think, learn and to walk safely upon this land with respect and humility.

We would also like to acknowledge our LGBTIQ+ elders whose brave activism and courage inspires and guides us. Sydney Queer Muslims is a young organisation, founded in 2017, yet we have supportive allies in various queer communities and we are grateful for the opportunities to learn from their experience.

We are also especially grateful to the National LGBTI Health Alliance for funding the Pilot Project discussed in this Report. Their generosity has provided LGBTIQ+ Muslims in Sydney with access to mental healthcare and spiritual counselling that they may not have otherwise been able to obtain. The access has numerous and profound benefits but most importantly, it can save lives.

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Introduction

Sydney Queer Muslims is a volunteer-based non-profit organisation that has been supporting queer Muslims in the greater Sydney area since its incorporation in 2017. Our work involves connecting LGBTIQ+ Muslims with an inclusive social network as well as providing resources to protect their spiritual, mental and physical health. Sydney Queer Muslims designed the Pilot Project, which informs this Report, to build our capacity and make counselling and spiritual counselling services accessible to those of our community who might not otherwise be able to afford it. The intention of the Pilot Project is to explore the impact of connecting LGBTIQ+ Muslims with spiritual and mental healthcare resources and provide findings that can guide our group's approach to seeking funding for the provision of these resources in future. For the purposes of this Report, the words 'queer' and 'LGBTIQ+' will be used interchangeably.

Summary of needs within the queer Muslim community

Queer Muslims have unique needs. For LGBTIQ+ Muslims who are new to the faith, and who do not have Muslim families, it can be difficult to forge relationships with other Muslims and this can lead to feelings of isolation and loneliness. For LGBTIQ Muslims from Muslim families, many come from migrant backgrounds that privilege the role of family in personal decision making and private life. As a result, many within our community struggle with severe guilt over deviating, or having plans to deviate, from their families' expectations of them to lead heterosexual lives. Much of this guilt often emerges from beliefs that an important part of being a good Muslim, and a good person in a broader sense, involves maintaining a harmonious relationship with relatives. For LGBTIQ Muslims more generally, guilt may also emerge from beliefs that same-sex intimacy and non-cisgender identities are sinful and incompatible with leading a Muslim life. Spirituality is an important part of the lives of many queer Muslims and we have observed that significant numbers struggle to find a balance between finding peace as same-sex attracted and/or gender queer Muslims and fostering positive relationships with their families and Muslim communities.

The tension that emerges as a result of having difficulty reconciling Islam and sexual orientation or gender identity has caused some to experience severe mental health problems. Some among our community have died by suicide or considered it, engaged in self-harm, or struggled through prolonged periods of depression or anxiety as a direct result of this spiritual conflict. The social conflict that emerges from contending with homophobia within Muslim communities (as well as from within society as a whole) and Islamophobia within queer communities also has a negative impact on the mental health of LGBTIQ+ Muslims. While we at Sydney Queer Muslims always refer such people to the appropriate mental healthcare service providers when they approach us for help, we have observed that the root of their suffering often remains untreated and unaddressed by mainstream psychological and psychiatric help. This fact inspired us to reach out in search of a solution and led us to approach the National LGBTI Health Alliance for funding for this Pilot Project, which we hope will be the first of many subsequent projects that expand our capacity to provide services to meet these needs.

Goals and objectives

The objective of this Pilot Project was to connect same-sex attracted and gender-diverse Muslims with Islamic spiritual counselling and/or mental health professionals from Muslim backgrounds and remove the barriers to care that the cost of such services might pose. By referring vulnerable members of our community to this kind of counselling, and making it accessible to all, we intended this Pilot Project to help ease the suffering of those whose needs surpass what mainstream mental healthcare can provide or who do not have access to mental healthcare and/or social support at all. In addition to alleviating suffering, we expected that this would also improve the general quality of life for many queer Muslims in Sydney and, in some cases, also save lives.

Methods

At Sydney Queer Muslims, we collaborate regularly with Imam Mushin Hendricks and secured his agreement to participate in this Pilot Project from the start. We felt that his unique background made him the best qualified to provide spiritual counselling to our

community. Imam Muhsin Hendricks is a classically trained Islamic scholar who studied at the University of Islamic Studies in Karachi, Pakistan. He is an *imam* (religious leader) by profession and also a human rights activist focusing on sexual orientation and gender identity within Islam. He has conducted independent research on Islam and sexual diversity and published on these topics in addition to designing and facilitating many workshops / training programs on Islam, sexual orientation and gender identity. In addition to his religious qualifications, Imam Muhsin Hendricks holds a Diploma in Counselling and Communication from the South African College of Applied Psychology and this, together with his identity as a queer Muslim himself, enables him to relate to LGBTIQ+ Muslims in a meaningful way.

Throughout the course of this project, we have also actively sought collaboration with other Muslim counsellors and psychologists. We are very grateful to have ongoing collaboration in this Pilot Project with Milad Faeeh, who holds a Bachelor of Counselling Degree and has practiced for the last 3 years working with current proven-methods in assisting individuals with overcoming depression, anxiety, panic and stress. The therapy modalities he employs are Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), Brief Therapy, Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy (CBT) and Person-Centred Counselling.

The Pilot Project ran for a period of one year between 2018 and 2019 and services associated with it were advertised to our community by word of mouth, on our Sydney Queer Muslim website (<http://sydneyqueermuslims.org.au>), and also on social media. The assistance provided involved short-term crisis counselling, help with family reconciliation, social support, group therapy managed by Milad Faeeh, workshops and spiritual counselling with Imam Muhsin Hendricks and also the production of various audio-visual resources intended for distribution over social media.

This Report and its recommendations are also informed by the author's experience of conducting research on gender and sexual diversity among Muslim communities. From 2013 to 2018, I conducted an ethnographic study that explored attitudes towards sexuality, dating and reproductive health among Muslim young people aged between 18 and 30 in the small city-state of Singapore and the Sydney metropolitan area of New South Wales, Australia. The intention of this research was to document how some unmarried Muslims of various ethnicities, gender identities and sexual orientations position themselves within local Muslim community discourses of piety, shame and reputation while simultaneously

negotiating their position within the multicultural societies in which they live. This study was conducted for the purposes of completing my PhD thesis, which was submitted in February 2018 and passed without corrections in September of the same year. Some material in this Report is adapted from my PhD thesis and all case studies used in this Report come from the my unpublished personal field notes collected during this study. All names used in this Report are pseudonyms and some small details have been changed to protect the privacy of my research participants. Ethical approval for this research was obtained from the Macquarie University Human Research Ethics Committee (Ref: 5201300128) on 11 April 2013 and this research meets the requirements of the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007).

Structure of this Report

In order to understand the complexity of the pressures queer Muslims face and the challenges they live with, it is necessary to outline the context they live in. To this end, this Report will begin with a discussion of ‘the Muslim community’ since this term is often used in the singular and rarely questioned in mainstream discourse and public conversations about Islam. While Muslim communities are often portrayed as being quite similar to each other and insular, the reality is more nuanced with individual Muslims drawing on a variety of influences (including those from outside Muslim communities) in the construction of their beliefs and identities.

The next section in this Report considers Muslim identity and challenges some common assumptions about how Muslims construct their identities and relate to Islam. Identity can be a contentious topic and unfortunately for LGBTIQ+ Muslims, the contemplation of identity and belonging can be a source of great pain. Some Muslims exclude others who are queer from Muslim community events and affairs and deny the Muslim identity of LGBTIQ+ Muslims. Among queer communities, and more worryingly among some healthcare providers, some LGBTIQ+ Muslims have been made to feel unwelcome because of Islamophobic assumptions that are made out of ignorance. As such, this section explores the various ways that identity can be constructed and discusses a way in which organisations, such as Sydney Queer Muslims and others, can adopt inclusive ways of welcoming Muslims of all kinds.

Following the sections on Muslim communities and identity, this Report continues with a section devoted to describing the wider multicultural context of Australia and how Muslims are often stereotyped and negatively perceived. Experiences of Islamophobia are relevant to the experience of LGBTIQ+ Muslims because they can increase the sense of isolation they experience. For example, living in an environment where Muslims are frequently perceived with a mixture of fear and suspicion by non-Muslims can make LGBTIQ+ Muslims who seek belonging in queer spaces feel pressured to downplay or even forsake their own spirituality. The ‘closeting’ of religious identity from non-Muslims in a similar way to how any queer Muslims closet their sexual or gender identity from their Muslim families and/or communities can be a source of harm and alienation for LGBTIQ+ Muslims (Irving 2018, Abraham 2009). This section explores the context in which this closeting of religious identity takes place.

This Report will then consider literature that has been written about Islam and homosexuality. Muslims who oppose same-sex intimacy and gender diversity, as well as those who accept and support it, often appeal to the discourse and decisions of Islamic scholars when articulating their views. As such, this Report will explore some of these discussions in order to understand the variety of Muslim positions towards same-sex intimacy and gender diversity.

At this point in the Report, we will consider the reflections of Imam Muhsin Hendricks and Milad Faeeh on their experiences providing counselling through the Pilot Project. Their comments and suggestions will be followed by findings from my own research that illustrate the challenges that queer Muslims face from both their families as well as queer communities. This additional information taken from my research provides context to the reflections of Imam Muhsin Hendricks and Milad Faeeh and offers an overview of factors that shape the relationships that LGBTIQ+ Muslims have with both their own families and communities as well as with the queer communities that they may reach out to. The Report will then conclude with a statement of general recommendations.

Defining the Muslim community

Although the term ‘Muslim community’ is often used in the singular in scholarly work (Haniff, 2003), in media discourse, and by Muslims themselves in Sydney, it is far from a united, monolithic religious community. For example, sectarian divisions, racism and disagreements about what actions or beliefs disqualify a Muslim from the fold of Islam and demonstrate that person to be a *kafir*, or disbeliever, can all be found among Muslim communities in Sydney. However, at the same time, many Muslims believe strongly in the existence of a single *ummah*, or community of believers in Islam, although they often also have a clear vision of which kind of fellow believers rightfully belong to it.

The concept of community by itself is often taken for granted as a commonsense term and as such has limited use without parameters being set for its definition (Bauman, 1996). Cohen (1985) and Anderson (1991), for example, have defined community as a mental construct though they have different ideas about how it functions. Cohen (1985) sees manifestations of a community in a given locality, such as an abundance of people of one ethnic group living in a particular suburb, as lending it a kind of credibility while Anderson (1991) believes a community may be entirely imagined, such as in the case of a nation state like Australia. Migration and the establishment of diasporas also challenge how we might think of community because of the deterritorialised nature of transnational communities (Appadurai, 1990; Clifford, 1994; Vetrovec, 2001). In reference to specifically Muslim communities, the Internet further complicates the concept because, as Bunt has observed, ‘It is through a digital interface that an increasing number of people will view their religion and their place in the Muslim worlds, affiliated to wider communities in which “the West” becomes, at least in cyberspace, increasingly redundant’ (2003: 211). The Internet, then, may be thought of as allowing Muslims to ‘create a new form of imagined community, or reimagined umma’ (Mandaville, 1999: 24). The online presence of Sydney Queer Muslims is part of this process and allows queer Muslims to connect to others within Muslim communities that they might not otherwise have access to.

The boundaries of communities are blurred in multicultural metropolitan contexts such as Sydney. Migration, the Internet, and the experience of living alongside people who

are different to one's own cultural background all impact upon the boundaries existing between communities (Bhabha, 1994). A range of scholars in recent decades, such as Marcus (1986, 1995); Appadurai (1991); Clifford (1992); Gupta and Ferguson (1992, 1997); and Ortner (1997) have encouraged reflection upon the fluidity of such boundaries and the interconnectedness of communities and cultures. To illustrate this with an example we might look at the family of Jihan, who is a 24-year-old heterosexual, cis-gendered male Muslim Australian who lives in the Western Sydney suburb of Bankstown.

Jihan describes himself as being Lebanese Australian, a heritage that he inherits from his mother who was also born in Australia. His father is an Anglo Australian convert to Islam who takes pride in his Welsh and Scottish ancestry. Jihan's oldest brother married an Australian Muslim of mixed Arab-Javanese heritage and his sister married a Lebanese Muslim migrant to Australia. His younger brother is not yet married and is considering spending some time in Amman, Jordan to pursue Islamic religious studies. While Jihan's family maintain a close relationship with some other Lebanese families in their neighbourhood, and Jihan identifies himself primarily with his Lebanese heritage, he did not consider himself or his family to be part of a Lebanese Muslim community as such. As he described it to me, 'We have lots of Leb friends and family but we have lots of other friends and family too'. Jihan's favourite local religious leader is a Fijian Indian imam who migrated to Australia named Afroz Ali and he spends some time on YouTube every week listening to sermons from overseas imams to make up for not being able to attend the Friday *jumu'ah* prayer at a mosque.

The Muslim influences on Jihan's life and that of his family are clearly varied. The non-Muslim influences on them are even more so. Bankstown is a suburb with a high Muslim population and Jihan defines himself and his family as religiously conservative yet this does not cut them off from the non-Muslim majority context in which they live. Jihan made some non-Muslim friends at university and the whole family enjoy good relationships with a number of non-Muslim acquaintances in the neighbourhood in which they live. Western Sydney's multicultural influence is reflected in many aspects of their lives, from Jihan's brother's almost obsessive devotion to the Canterbury-Bankstown Rugby League Club to some of the dishes prepared in the family kitchen. Jihan and his family are also exposed to a multitude of ideas through education, the media, advertising and other avenues. For this reason and others, it

is best not to make assumptions about a person's identity based on the ethnicity they identify with.

These varied influences affect individuals in different ways, yet they inevitably touch the lives of everyone and challenge bounded notions of community and identity. In my research I have observed some young Muslims who believe very strongly in the existence of, and their membership to, a bounded ethno-religious community. However, I have also observed many others who, like Jihan, see themselves as a Sydney Muslim without strong ties to a particular ethnic community. In an acknowledgement of this diversity, Sydney Queer Muslims does not focus their outreach or engagement work on Muslims of any particular ethnic group. We also recommend that other non-Muslim organisations acknowledge the diversity in culture, practice and religiosity that exists within Muslim communities as well as the fact that many Muslims do not identify as belonging to a Muslim community at all.

Muslim identity

Islamophobia appears to be on the rise globally (Poynting and Mason, 2007: 61). Social and political concerns about Muslim communities in non-Muslim countries has provoked much interest in Muslim identity. Studies exist that explore Muslim identity as a creative project (Qureshi and Moores, 1999; S. Khan, 2000; Aitchison, Hopkins and Kwan, 2007), probe uncertain and questioning aspects of some Muslim identities (Nielsen, 1987; Dwyer, 1999; Haddad, 2004; Jacobson, 2015), and others look into the more political dimensions of Muslim identity, such as the various impacts of public debates about Islam (Shadid, 2006; Mandaville, 2009), Islamism (Ismail, 2004), and also how Muslims perceive their own identities in the midst of all this discussion (Lewis, 2002).

Bold claims have also been made about Muslim identities that privilege the influence of religion, such as Khan's assertion that, 'Over and above other competing associations and identities, Islam is central for Muslim existence, hence the level of connection with Islam and everything Islamic is quite relevant for Muslim communities' (Z. Khan, 2000: 37). Although Khan's comments about Muslim identity are definitely true for many (Peek, 2005), they are not true for all. For example, many Muslims identify as such as an acknowledgement of an ethno-religious heritage more than as a spiritual commitment to Islam (Mandaville, 2007: 294; Stephenson, 2011). Furthermore, among Muslims who prioritise the religious aspect of their identities, such as in the studies conducted by Werbner (2002), Lewis (2007), Jacobsen (2011) and Jacobson (2015) among others, not all will do so out of piety alone. Factors such as experiences of Islamophobia and other forms of discrimination may motivate identification and solidarity with a Muslim community among some (Yip, 2004: 339; Spielhaus, 2010: 16). For Muslims living as minorities in non-Muslim majority countries, identifying with a Muslim community may serve as a strategy for gaining recognition (Jeldtoft, 2016: 28) or for accessing support resources (Salvatore, 1997).

Aspects of identity such as religious affiliation inform categories that are necessary to make sense of the world in which we live, yet they are dynamic and can shift depending on circumstances (Jeldtoft, 2009: 11). Individuals draw on such labels in order to define themselves and others, using them to cultivate closeness with some as well as to create a

sense of separation from others. Out of respect for the variable nature of identity, we at Sydney Queer Muslims avoid trying to define or discuss the identities of anyone who approaches us beyond the terms that they have used to describe themselves. Brubaker and Cooper have summarised some varied uses of the term 'identity' and suggested that describing 'all affinities and affiliations, all forms of belonging, all experiences of commonality, connectedness, and cohesion, all self-understandings and self-identifications in the idiom of "identity" saddles us with a blunt, flat, undifferentiated vocabulary' (2000: 2). To avoid this, we at Sydney Queer Muslims follow an approach I adopt in my research practice and instead rely instead on people's 'reportive definitions' of themselves (Barker, 2004: 89). This approach acknowledges the fluidity of self-understandings and self-representation and the fact that people can choose to emphasise specific aspects of their identities according to the context and company that they find themselves in (Adib and Guerrier, 2003: 430).

Muslims in multicultural Australia

Australia has long been a nation that is home to many cultures and where migrants and their descendants have come to far outnumber Indigenous communities. In recognition of the cultural diversity among its residents, Australian governments have institutionalised 'multiculturalism' as a national policy from the 1970s, yet what that policy looked like in practice has varied according to each serving government's visions and objectives in implementing it (Pardy and Lee 2011: 298). In recent years, many governments of multicultural countries have rethought their commitment to protecting cultural diversity and have instead started emphasising a need to cultivate integration and cohesion (Isin and Turner 2007: 11), which are often spoken of in terms of 'security'. Australia, in this respect, is no different and in 2007, the Howard government replaced the term 'multiculturalism' with 'citizenship', which according to Pardy and Lee (2011: 297) both reflected and led a national 'mood of frustration and fatigue with the labour of living with cultural diversity'. In 2011, the Australian Federal Government reinstated the usage of multiculturalism in Australian political life, yet the tensions and disagreements surrounding what constitutes 'Australianness' in a multicultural Australia, as well as the compatibility of multiculturalism and 'Aussie values', continue at both the popular and political level (Hage, 1998; Hopkins, 2011; Mansouri and Pietsch, 2011; Woodlock, 2011).

Despite the fact that some of the earliest settlers in Australia were Muslim (Ganter 2008: 488), Muslim migrants and Muslim Australians have been often discriminated against and negatively stereotyped from the arrival of the first Afghan cameleers in the 1860s to the present day (Saniotis 2004: 50). Common among these stereotypes are beliefs that Muslims, as a result of some *inherent* quality of 'Islam' (Hopkins 2011: 111; Poynting et al. 2004: 14), are backward and violent (Ganter 2008: 482), wish to 'take over' Australia (Dunn, Klocker, and Salabay 2007: 571); are misogynistic (Kabir 2011: 246), are irrational (Kabir 2008: 274); are unable to adapt to Australia's 'Judeo-Christian culture' (Kabir 2007: 1286), and are more religiously observant than any other faith community in Australia (Hopkins 2011; Woodlock 2011: 398). Although Muslim communities in Australia are highly ethnically, culturally and linguistically diverse, this heterogeneity is frequently overlooked in general

discourse and in the media (Kabir 2006: 313), particularly following the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States (Saniotis 2004: 51) as well as the tragic 'Sydney rapes' in 2000, the 2005 Cronulla riots, and Sheikh Hilali's highly publicised comments about rape in 2006 (Bloul 2008: 11).

The widespread discourse of mistrust and stereotypes that circulates around Muslims in Australia has consequences for how many Muslim and non-Muslim Australians perceive and interact with each other (Hopkins 2011). This in turn influences popular ideas of 'Australianess', and as a result many recent discussions of Australian multiculturalism include debates about the compatibility of Islam and 'Aussie values' and whether or not Muslims, in particular, pose a cultural threat. Although assimilation is no longer a policy aim in Australia, religious groups are still widely expected to be assimilated to a 'secular society' (Bouma 1997: 74). Furthermore, there exists a common perception among both Muslims and non-Muslims that an authentic Australian identity is not accessible to members of minority communities (Woodlock 2011: 396; Hage 1998). Many Muslims, then, may feel that they are in a bind where it is possible to be 'either truly Australian or truly Muslim but not both at the same time' (Woodlock 2011: 392).

Noble and Tabar have suggested that the children of migrants to Australia are 'caught between cultures' in that they live in both the culture of their parents as well as that of wider Australian society (2002: 131). While this is certainly true for some, others may strive to reject everything that they associate with 'Australianess', the definition of which can vary greatly from person to person (Kabir 2011: 248; Rane et al. 2011: 131). Others still forge what may be considered to be 'new' identities that reject any dichotomy between the categories 'Muslim' and 'Australian' (Dunn 2004: 347). Finally, there are also cultural nominalists who have little, if anything, other than a distant familial connection to Islam (Saeed 2007: 400), with many Aboriginal Australians among them (Stephenson 2011), yet this does not suggest that such people have no Muslim identity. Indeed, there are many non-practicing Muslims for whom being 'Muslim' indicates membership of a social category rather than a religious one (Martin 2010; Spielhaus 2010: 18). With the boundaries between being a 'practicing' Muslim and a 'non-practicing' Muslim being highly subjective and variable, the simplest element of a person's Muslim identity is arguably an individual's commitment to identifying themselves as such. Since there are so many ways that a Muslim

person's identity can translate into lived experience, we at Sydney queer Muslims are passionate about accepting people as they are. We are not theologians and we make no theological claims about what 'true' Islam or 'correct' Muslim practice looks like. We are also keenly aware that Islamophobic bias can and does seep into queer communities in Australia (Abraham 2009, 2010), and as such we take every opportunity to combat Islamophobia through holding public talks and workshops as well as through engaging with non-Muslim allies.

Islam and homosexuality

Classical Islamic scholarly discourse portrays men as women as occupying complementary gender roles and the traditional Islamic ideal of the family is a procreative unity of a man and a woman (Bouhdiba, 1985; Ahmed, 1992). Heterosexual marriage, then, enjoys a privileged status and any deviation from this is viewed by many Muslims as a violation of nature (Duran 1993: 183; Schmidt 1995: 85). As such, Muslims often consider same-sex intimacy to be a grave sin (Dunne 1990; Schild 1992), which some may even consider to merit the death penalty (AbuKhalil 1997). El-Rouayheb has noticed that some Sunni jurists considered the severity of transgression to depend very much upon whether or not intimacy involved penetration (by a penis), with acts such as kissing and caressing not being considered to be major sins in and of themselves (2005: 137-138).

The Qur'an, which is the most respected source of Islamic knowledge among Muslims, does not specify a punishment for performing male homosexual acts (Siraj 2009: 44), and there is no agreement over whether or not the Qur'an even mentions female same-sex sexuality (Ali 2006: 81). The various opinions existing about punishment in this respect come mostly from hadith literature¹ and the ensuing judgements of various schools of Shari'a law (Bouhdiba 1985). Such literature is far from without criticism, however, both in terms of interpretation and in many cases authenticity too. Islamic scholar Ziauddin Sardar, for example, believes that claims that the Prophet punished homosexuality are completely unfounded because there is no direct evidence of such and the hadith literature that does address homosexuality is of dubious authenticity at best and completely fabricated at worst (Sardar 2011: 326-327).

There is no traditional school of Islamic jurisprudence, in either Shi'a or Sunni thought, that permits same-sex sexual intercourse. New alternative theological interpretations are growing, but they remain relatively limited and they are frequently dismissed by Muslim religious leaders and communities alike as being heretical or at least severely misled (Kelly

¹ Hadith literature records sayings of the Prophet Muhammad into various volumes that serve, together with the Qur'an, as a basis for the various schools of Shari'ah law. For some examples of passages that have been understood to prohibit homosexuality or describe punishment for it, please see the following: Bukhari (72:774); Abu Dawud (4462 and 4448); and al-Tirmidhi (1:152).

2010: 250). The Qur'anic account of the People of Lut is central to many Islamic condemnations of same-sex sexuality yet there are ambiguities in Islamic jurisprudence about what precisely is forbidden (Zanghellini 2010: 275). According to the Qur'an, the Prophet Lut ('Lot' in the Bible) hosted guests who attracted the lustful desires of his neighbours. These guests were messengers of God, and when Lut's warnings against committing sexual transgression fell on deaf ears, a shower of brimstone killed most of the population. The Prophet Lut is referenced in 14 chapters of the Qur'an and this story is widely considered to provide an unquestionable basis for the prohibition of same-sex sexuality in Islam (Yahya 2000; Zafeeruddin 1996).

Attempts to reconsider the significance of this story to Islamic practice and belief often focus on the question of consent, violence or oppression rather than same-sex intimacy in itself, as being the core message of the account. Zanghellini, for example, argues that the story of Lut demonstrates a Qur'anic condemnation of 'nonegalitarian sexual activity — whether consensual or nonconsensual — and illustrates this condemnation through the case of same-sex anal penetration, which at that time was widely and predominantly intelligible as a practice of subordination [...]' (2010: 288). Scott Kugle, an American convert and scholar of Islam, describes the Lut story as being 'about infidelity through inhospitality and greed, rather than about sex acts in general or sexuality of any variation in particular [...] It is a story as a condemnation of greed, miserliness, sexual oppression, and a rejection of the prophet's ethics of care' (Kugle 2003: 213–214). Imam Muhsin Hendricks goes even further and makes a compelling argument, based on Islamic texts, that mainstream Muslim interpretations of the story of Lut are based on a misunderstanding and that Muslim communities should accept LGBTIQ+ Muslims as they are (Hendricks, 2010).

Islamic jurisprudence from all schools of thought is built upon interpretation. Although each school has various methodologies of producing Islamic law, and legal theory or *usul al-fiqh* guides interpretations, a jurist's legal reasoning, known as *ijtihad*, is a subjective process. A distinction can be, and often is, made between *ijtihad* and 'divine' or 'prophetic' law (Kamali 2003: 468-499), yet this perspective tends not to recognise that all legislation, regardless of whether or not any given law may be considered self-evident, is the result of juridical analysis (Zollner 2010: 197, n. 13). This is a relevant point because some Islamic scholars speak very confidently about the condemnation of same-sex sexuality, as well as

the punishments for those who engage in it, as being the unquestionable will of God (Hekma, 2002). This moral certainty is something which Zollner perceives as being symptomatic of a scholarly authoritarianism that underlies much current Islamic legal discourse and does not allow space for the process of interpretation or for the open discussion of legal proof (2010: 198). This moral certainty is also a relatively recent phenomenon. Much has been written about non-heterosexuality within Muslim communities throughout history and it appears that male same-sex intimacy was relatively openly practiced from the seventh up until the twentieth century (Murray, 1997; Abdulhadi, 2010; Sharlet, 2010). Najmabadi's *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity* (2005), for example, describes major changes in sexual attitudes in Iran from the sixteenth through nineteenth centuries. It has only been in relatively recent generations that tolerance has shifted significantly, so the origins of homophobia among Muslim communities are not solely rooted in interpretations of scripture.

Adding to existing literature that suggests religiosity has a negative impact upon attitudes towards homosexual men and women when compared to people who state no religious preference (Bernstein 2004; Herek 1994), Siraj claims that Islam explicitly condemns homosexuality and that a 'theologically-based homophobia' fosters intolerance of homosexuals among Muslims (2009: 41). She is not alone as other scholars have similarly implied that there is something inherent in Islam that is homophobic (Kelly, 2010: 249; Sarac, 2015: 482-483). The claim that 'homosexuality is sinful in Islam' is very imprecise because it is unclear who has the authority to speak for 'Islam' and whether it is same-sex intercourse or a non-heterosexual identity that is considered sinful. There have been scholarly theological discussions about this, but in common discourse (even among trained religious scholars) there are still many assumptions that go unchallenged and questions that remain unanswered. For example, a homosexual identity is not only a relatively recent phenomenon (Halperin, 1990), but also it is entirely possible for a person to identify as such without being sexually active. Conversely, there are some who engage in same-sex intercourse without identifying as homosexual. There is also the question of gender diverse identities and what the acceptable limits of gender identity might look like in practice within Muslim communities across cultures. In South Sulawesi, there exist groups of Bugis Muslims who are very devout and yet they traditionally recognise the existence of 5 genders instead of 2 (Davies 2007).

There are also growing groups of Muslims around the world who interpret Islam to be inclusive of sexual and gender diversity (Rouhani 2007). Does their minority perspective on gender make them any less 'real' or 'orthodox' Muslims? Are the voices of their religious leaders somehow less 'Islamic' than those who maintain more heteronormative views?

There are various ways of understanding what exactly Islam is: Marranci (2006: 31-52) suggests that Islam is an emotional commitment expressed through simply 'feeling to be' Muslim; and perhaps most famously, Talal Asad has understood Islam as a 'tradition' that consists of 'discourses that seek to instruct practitioners regarding the correct form and purpose of a given practice [...]’ (Asad 1986: 14). These conceptualisations of Islam may differ significantly from one another, but they have one thing in common: a focus on Muslims and Muslim discourse rather than theological abstractions. Claims that are made about Islam as an abstract entity, such as asserting something is correct ‘according to Islam’, are misleading because Islam cannot exist beyond the local practices and beliefs of those who identify themselves as Muslim. Many works that discuss the experiences of LGBTIQ+ Muslims contain a section that discusses 'Islam and homosexuality', 'traditional Islamic stances' or simply 'Islam and sexuality' in a general sense. Although contextualising local expressions of sexuality within wider scholarly discussions of Islamic norms and values is certainly helpful, care must be taken to avoid essentialising Islam or the significance attached to the various sexualities of Muslims. As anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod warns, Islam and constructions of sexuality are best understood purely in their local contexts and not as having transhistorical and intrinsic meanings (Abu-Lughod 1997: 248).

Reflections on providing spiritual counselling within Sydney Queer Muslims Pilot Project

By Imam Muhsin Hendricks

Most clients who approached me for counselling seem apprehensive initially, because I'm also an Imam and they are probably afraid that I may not fully support them. This has much to do with how religious leaders are perceived by queer Muslims. Some may have had personal encounters with religious leaders and did not feel supported or heard by them.

Often my authority as an Imam is challenged through clients feeling the need to tell me how 'bad a Muslim they have been' as a way of testing my level of acceptance of them. I find myself having to build trust in the first few minutes of a counselling session before unpacking the issues. Once there was a sense of trust, it was hugely empowering for the clients to be able to speak to a religious leader who understands and supports them.

I often find myself having to self-disclose, in order to build trust. Although this is hugely empowering, there are some clients who may still question my legitimacy as an Imam. There may be perceptions that I am justifying my own position as a queer Muslim and this may affect the level of trust. This is completely understandable especially where queer Muslims have internalised negative messaging from their communities, such as 'how can you be queer and Muslim', or 'can an Imam even be gay?' Speaking to me as a queer Imam was for most clients challenging, a last resort and yet rewarding when they give themselves permission to be counselled by a person like myself.

Most clients seek to reconcile their sexual orientation and gender identity with Islam. Islam seems to be an identity they are not able to forgo or compromise on. They want to know what the Quran says about homosexuality. They fear making the wrong decisions that may have consequences in the Afterlife. They fear divine

punishment. They fear Hell. It really helps to have an Islamic theological background as a counsellor when reconciliation with Islam seems to be the most important thing for the client. Counselling sessions in which the client sought to reconcile with Islam almost always ends in them asking for resources so they can do their own research. The counselling experience has regenerated an interest in clients to learn more about sexual orientation and gender identity within Islam. For this reason, I suggest that Sydney Queer Muslims (SQM) continue to invest in resources (pdf & video) that can be made available electronically and accessible to the client post counselling.

The client almost always steps into the counselling space with depression, self-loathing, internalised homophobia / transphobia, guilt and shame. As the client becomes comfortable with being queer and Muslim and has managed to drown out the negative messages about who they are, these feelings seem to wane.

Expectations

Most clients want to receive counselling from me, because I am an Imam. There is an expectation that I would know enough about Islam and to be able to provide answers for them. Some clients just want to hear from an Imam that it is permissible to be queer and Muslim. I'm happy if this helps in some way, but I do expect that the client would challenge the information I give them so that there is not a dependency on authority or a blind-following, but rather a willingness to engage and to question for their own personal empowerment. Since SQM provides counselling as a free service to queer Muslims, I expect that clients take the session seriously.

Core issues

The main issues queer Muslims deal with is the fear of rejection and cognitive dissonance (the inability to reconcile Islam and sexual orientation

as two equally important identities).

Subconsciously they seem to know that God is accepting of who they are. They fear the rejection from their families, friends and community more. If there are any mental health issues detected through counselling, it is most often as a result of this rejection they had to withstand over time and how they had to negotiate themselves and navigate spaces in order to be accepted.

I've had the privilege to counsel queer Muslims from different geographical contexts and I have noticed how the socio-economic situation they find themselves in does impact on their levels of self-esteem and self-acceptance. Queer Muslims who are employed and financially independent seem to do better than those who are unemployed or financially dependent. Social pressure, the pressure to perform academically and the need to live up to the standards of society seem to influence levels of self-esteem and self-acceptance. Their suicidal tendencies noticed in the counselling room is not entirely as a result of cognitive dissonance (inability to reconcile Islam and sexual orientation), but the intersectionality between that and socio-economic conditions.

Often clients may intoxicate by abusing alcohol, taking drugs and engaging in unhealthy sexual practices to cope with the cognitive dissonance. These addictions cannot be treated in isolation of the main issue which is reconciliation with Islam. Safe spaces in which queer Muslims can practice Islam or in which they can see this being role-modelled is hugely empowering. While spiritual healing may not be of great importance to secular-based counsellors, it cannot be downplayed when we deal with queer Muslims who seek to reconcile with their faith.

Seeking to find a space for queer Muslims within an orthodox Islamic framework or organised religion is not possible. There has to be an urgency around connecting with Islam in terms of its values and principals as opposed to an Islam

that is ritualistic and organised. Hence, an inclusive and compassion-centred Islam must be promoted and queer Muslims must be connected to these spaces so that they are able to live out both their queer and Islamic identities.

Summary of recommendations

Acquiring knowledge: I often advise queer Muslims to empower themselves with researched knowledge about SOGI and Islam.

Safe-spaces: SQM must invest in creating safe spiritual spaces in which queer Muslims can practice their faith, since I often advise them to seek out these spaces.

Role-modelling: SQM must invest in training a critical mass of queer Muslim leadership who can role-model what a queer Muslim should look like, since I often advise clients to connect with other queer Muslims in their area.

Spiritual practices: I advise queer Muslims to find a safe space in which they can engage in spiritual practices.

A renewed commitment to a compassion-centred Islam: SQM should have ongoing trainings / workshops on Islam that is compassion-centred and perhaps invite other scholars to speak on the subject.

Queer Muslims must know there is a space to which they can come for authentic knowledge about Islam and receive educational resources to empower them.

Reflections on providing counselling within Sydney Queer Muslims Pilot Project

By Milad Faeeh

The clients that I saw in a professional capacity were seeking guidance from a therapist who is of the same culture, sexual orientation and faith around the following difficulties they were experiencing:

1. **Non-acceptance:** Majority of clients who had courageously divulged their sexual orientation to their families and friends were met with hostility, disregard and at times were disowned. As a result, they experienced conditional acceptance (i.e. if they become straight then they will be accepted). This has led to them to seek help from a professional therapist.

2. **Self-loathing:** A number of clients who I met had developed self-loathing (in other words they absorbed their parents and friends hate and turned it towards themselves). This self-loathing had unfortunately led to these clients to suppress the part of them that was not “culturally and religiously” acceptable to their families and friends. And by suppressing that part of them, these clients were not living out of their true self. For example: When the client attends group therapy he/she is able to be genuine as they are in a safe and supportive environment. When the client returns to their family home or is contacted by a family member, they adopt “another part of themselves” which is acceptable to their families and friends.

3. **Depression:** A number of clients were experiencing feelings of worthlessness, hopelessness and guilt. When these clients were disowned or rejected by their families and friends, they began to question their self-worth (i.e. ‘maybe we’re not worthy of being loved and accepted for who we are’, etc.). They began to feel hopeless as they wanted to be accepted and loved by those close to them, however the only way for them to achieve that is to “become

heterosexuals” which they know deep down is not possible. They began to feel guilt as they believed that they “caused great pain to their parents and loved ones” for being of a certain sexual orientation (in other words, if they weren’t LGBTIQ+ then their parents and loved ones would not have to endure such pain).

4. **Shame:** A number of clients “swallowed” the shame that their parents and friends projected onto them and that shame became their shame which is very unfortunate. These clients haven’t realised (yet) that they are not responsible for “how their parents and friends feel”. In other words, the feelings and emotions of the parents and friends don’t belong to the clients.

5. **Re-assurance of Allah’s love and mercy:** A majority of the clients were seeking reassurance that Allah still loves them and that they are not going to end up in hell for being of the sexual orientation that they are. Once again, their parents, friends and society have unfortunately indoctrinated them with so much negativity around homosexuality that they are petrified of what will be waiting for them on the other side.

6. **Connection:** All of the clients that I had met simply wanted to connect with other like-minded individuals in a safe, supportive, compassionate and most importantly confidential setting. The group therapy sessions we held became a sanctuary (and a mosque) for these clients where they could take a deep breath and just discuss whatever is on their mind. In other words, they were able to live out their true-selves for a couple of hours. This connection provided them with a reprieve from the pain, non-acceptance and abandonment they had experienced at the hands of the people who are supposed to love and care for them unconditionally.

LGBTIQ+ Muslims, families and Muslim communities in Sydney

Not all LGBTIQ+ Muslims experience rejection from their Muslim families or communities. Many Muslim families enjoy an open and affirming relationship with their LGBTIQ+ relatives, yet the focus on this Report is not on them. Short of acceptance, other families employ a kind of tolerance of their LGBTIQ+ relatives. In some cases there exists a ‘will not to know’ (Murray, 1997), where Muslim families deliberately refuse to acknowledge the sexuality and/or gender identity of a relative. In other cases, the Muslim families of LGBTIQ+ Muslims may acknowledge their sexuality, and even invite a same-sex partner to family functions, but deny that the relationship is a romantic one or pretend that it is not sexual in nature (Bonhuys and Erlank, 2012: 277). Family dynamics can be complicated. Despite heteronormativity and the pressures to adhere to normative gender roles that exist among many Muslim families, many LGBTIQ Muslims retain close relationships with their relatives and it is a mistake to oversimplify all negative reactions that LGBTIQ+ Muslims may face from them as tantamount to rejection (Al-Sayyad, 2010). However, many LGBTIQ+ Muslims do face rejection, and when that happens, the results can be tragic. This section will describe what family rejection can look like and then list some of its consequences using data from my own research as well as scholarly literature on the topic. Family rejection appears to have four main impacts on LGBTIQ+ Muslims: 1.) establishment of unhealthy relationships with relatives; 2.) engagement in unhealthy and potentially self-destructive behaviours; 3.) denial and emotional distancing; and 4.) the internalisation of shame and homophobia. Since the experience of family rejection can lead to poor mental health, self-harm and even suicide, it has been a topic of key importance during the Pilot Project.

Having a relative identify as LGBTIQ+ can be a painful experience for Muslim families (Baderoon, 2015: 908; Bonhuys and Erlank, 2012: 277). Some Muslim families believe that same sex attraction or gender diversity is symptomatic of having contracted a ‘Western disease’ of sorts (Minwalla et al., 2005: 116; Bonhuys and Erlank, 2012: 269; Yip, 2004; Kassisieh, 2011: 16; Boellstorff, 2005; Jaspal and Cinnirella, 2010, 2014), and family

members may believe that they have let down the LGBTIQ+ person by somehow not protecting them from it. In these cases, I have observed that non-heterosexuality and gender diversity are viewed either as a kind of demonic influence or as a voluntary lifestyle choice (Irving, 2018). To illustrate the former case, I have interviewed families in Sydney who believe that their LGBTIQ+ relative has been misled into believing that they cannot be heterosexual and that this would not have been possible if the family had not migrated to a Western country. This particular narrative often intersects with ideas that sexual and gender diversity are symptomatic of mental illness.

When sexual and gender diversity are pathologised within a community, LGBTIQ+ people often find themselves subjected to various ‘treatments.’ Within Muslim communities, sometimes LGBTIQ+ people themselves seek out treatments in the belief that their sexual orientation or gender identity can be changed (Irving, 2018). In the case of Muslim communities in Sydney, as indeed elsewhere, these treatments can take the shape of conversion therapies or an exorcism, often referred to as a *ruqyah*. Between my own observations from my research as well as reports in the local media, there are many accounts of Muslim families sending young people who somehow fail to meet cultural heteronormative expectations of behaviour for various types of ‘corrective’ treatment (Marr, 2012; Hussein and Imtoual, 2016; Khalik, 2016). Conversion therapies seek to redirect non-heterosexual impulses through processes such as covert sensitisation, which involves conditioning the ‘patient’ to pair their sexual desire with an unpleasant image in order to eliminate it (Cautela, 1967). There is currently much research that suggests such so called ‘reparative therapies’ are extremely harmful (Halderman, 1991, 2008; Ford, 2002; Shidlo and Schroeder, 2002) and as such the Australian Psychological Society (APS) vehemently rejects them (APS, 2007), yet they are still reportedly employed by a few registered psychologists in Sydney’s Western suburbs as well as by various faith-based organisations (Irving, 2018). Although these therapies are harmful, the families and communities who encourage LGBTIQ+ Muslims to undergo them often do so out of care and an often desperate desire to ‘cure’ their loved one.

Other troubling ‘treatments’ for non-heterosexuality and gender diversity include exorcisms. Towards the end of 2018, some news stories were reported in Australia of conversion therapy practices in Indonesia including exorcisms (Hodge and Rayda, 2018;

Wibawa and Renaldi, 2018). According to a report published by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), exorcism was deemed necessary in these cases because of beliefs that ‘homosexuality and transgenderism are caused by a mental health disorder triggered by supernatural and demonic influences’ (Wibawa and Renaldi, 2018). While published reports on the prevalence of Muslim conversion therapy practices that include exorcism in Sydney, or even in Australia more broadly, are unavailable, I can confirm that I have collected accounts of it happening with similar justifications to those reported in Indonesia. According to those of my research participants who have undergone such procedures, exorcism practices vary widely and can range from simple ritual prayers to violent physical abuse. Furthermore, the prevalence of exorcism services existing to treat a wide range of ailments, and the abuses that they can include, have become so problematic in Australia that the Australian National Imams Council issued a media release in December 2018 to warn Muslims against ‘fraudulent individuals currently operating ‘Ruqya’ or spiritual healing services in an abusive, unislamic and illegal manner’ (ANIC, 2018). The definition of who is practicing these rituals in a ‘fraudulent’ manner is subjective.

Muslim families who do not view sexual or gender diversity as a mental illness or as the result of demonic influence may view it as a voluntary lifestyle choice and strongly believe that Islam condemns it (Duran, 1993; Halstead and Lewicka, 1998; Bonthuys and Erlank, 2012). From the perspective of a family who believes this, an LGBTIQ+ relative is often seen as someone who is wilfully disobedient to God and selfish in putting their own desires above the reputation and happiness of their family. In these cases, the family can feel hurt, betrayed, and at a loss to explain how their otherwise loving and good child could make such a devastating ‘choice.’ Families may expect the impact of this perceived ‘choice’ to negatively affect their reputation within the Muslim community as well as the business and/or marriage prospects of other relatives. These beliefs and perceptions are likely to result in a family’s inability to communicate with their LGBTIQ+ relative as well as interpret their coming out as a deliberate insult and this facilitates rejection, abandonment (such as being forced out of the family home into homelessness), and sometimes physical violence. Ingrained beliefs that heteronormativity is ‘natural’ make it very difficult for unaccepting family, friends or community to understand that the LGBTIQ+ person did not choose their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. As a result, physical violence or forcing an LGBTIQ+ relative into

homelessness may be viewed as a kind of corrective tough love that will ‘reform’ the person if they ‘repent’ or punish the person if they do not. In this situation, revealing one’s sexual or gender identity can be unthinkably painful or pose too great of a risk to personal safety. To avoid this, many young same-sex attracted Muslims keep their sexual orientation private.

Many LGBTIQ+ Muslims experience guilt towards their families regardless of whether they disclose or conceal their gender identity and/or sexual orientation. On the one hand, if an LGBTIQ+ Muslim considers disclosing their sexuality and/or gender identity to their family, they may experience guilt while reflecting upon the shame and distress the revelation will bring their loved ones. On the other hand, if that same person decides to conceal it, they may experience guilt for engaging in deception and feel torn between narratives that suggest a queer person’s goal should be to ‘come out’ and a desire to not hurt their relatives. Such a situation creates a common double bind that many LGBTIQ+ Muslims have experience with (Siraj, 2011; Jaspal, 2012; Irving, 2018). If a person decides to disclose their sexuality or gender identity, the guilt may intensify and negative reactions from relatives often make the experience a harrowing one. These emotional dynamics can motivate LGBTIQ+ Muslims to engage in unhealthy relationships with their families. For example, Shaimeen, who is a 24 year old Australian Muslim woman of Lebanese heritage, described some factors that shaped her relationship with her relatives.

I’ve always been a bit of a black sheep. They know I’m different, and I reckon they know why too. [...] Everything seems ok as long as nobody says anything, though. I try to distract them from it by doing everything I can for them. I want them to see how good I can be. [...] I might be deluding myself, but I hope that they’ll one day be able to accept that I can be lesbian, a good Muslim and a good daughter all at the same time. It’s not here yet, but one day. Maybe.

In our interviews, Shaimeen described having a very unequal relationship with her parents and siblings. She was eager for her family’s approval, and in an effort to please them maintained almost no boundaries in her interactions with them. Shaimeen played the role of caretaker, child minder, gardener, taxi, cook and more for her immediate relatives to the extent that it interfered with her university work in the past and with her personal life in the

present. Despite all this, however, Shaimeen had an advantage that helped centre her life: she was at peace spiritually and found no conflict between her faith and her sexuality.

LGBTIQ+ Muslims who have difficulty reconciling their faith and gender identity and/or sexuality suffer an additional layer of hardship which is further worsened by the harsh judgement of unaccepting relatives. The level of guilt described above is compounded for those who believe that their sexuality and/or gender identity is incompatible with their faith and that it puts them at spiritual risk (Yip, 2004; Jaspal and Cinnirella, 2010; Irving, 2018). Out of a belief that reconciliation is impossible, people in this situation often go to great lengths to rid themselves of their unwanted sexuality and/or gender identity through religious practice and prayer, which is sometimes referred to as an attempt to ‘pray the gay away.’ Other attempts to ‘cure’ themselves may involve conversion therapies, as discussed above, or even entering into a heterosexual marriage. Family members may or may not be involved in organising ‘treatments’ or helping their LGBTIQ+ relative find a suitable spouse. During my research, I observed that LGBTIQ+ Muslims often seek what they perceive to be solutions entirely on their own without letting their family know of their struggles with sexuality and/or gender identity. For example, Az, a 28 year old Australian Muslim man of Jordanian heritage, explained,

I just wanted to feel normal. I spent most of my life feeling like I didn’t belong because of [my sexuality]. So, I thought that I was being tested by Allah and decided to rise to the challenge. I poured every bit of energy I had into being the best Muslim I could be and when I was 25, I even got married. Marriage is half your *deen* [religion], right? [...] It didn’t help, and it ended badly. I went off the rails a bit after that.

Az’s experience is unfortunately not unique. Once LGBTIQ+ Muslims realise that their efforts to rid themselves of their unwanted sexuality and/or gender identity are not successful, they may succumb to poor mental health as well as self-destructive behaviours such as substance abuse. People in this situation internalise shame and homophobia and this can develop into an intense self-loathing. Sadly, the consequences of this can be fatal for some (Lytle et al., 2018).

LGBTIQ+ Muslims and queer communities in Sydney

The Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras is widely understood to represent values of radical acceptance and pride in individual uniqueness. However, there are many LGBTIQ+ Muslims who prefer not to participate because they feel unrepresented by what they perceived Mardi Gras to stand for and generally disillusioned with mainstream LGBTIQ+ spaces in Sydney. For them, Muslim visibility at Mardi Gras is unimportant at best and distasteful at worst. Fears also exist among some LGBTIQ+ Muslims that increasing visibility by marching at the parade would simply attract patronising pity from supporters and hatred from opponents, thus potentially increasing homophobia within the Muslim community, Islamophobia from others, and perhaps even inciting violence.

In contrast to the frequent allegations of medieval Western writers who considered Islam to be unacceptably tolerant of same-sex intimacy (Daniel, 1993), much contemporary discourse positions Muslim homophobia as somehow rooted in the teachings of Islam (Kelly, 2010: 249; Sarac, 2015: 483; Siraj, 2009: 41). Furthermore, Rahman has noticed that the intense global scrutiny that Islam and Muslims have been subjected to in recent years has been an attempt to explain the ‘otherness’ of Muslims and as a result of this examination, ‘Muslim identity has become the semiotic marker for all that is opposed to Western values’ (Rahman, 2014: 29). Against this backdrop, the existence of same-sex attracted, gender queer or transsexual Muslims who are comfortable in both their sexual, gender and religious identities can appear confusing, or even confronting, to non-religious people who identify with various mainstream LGBTIQ+ communities. As Abraham has explained in his research with queer Muslims in Australia, gay, lesbian or bisexual Muslims may be considered ‘unviable subjects’ by conservative Muslims while also being considered ‘impossible – or at least dubious – subjects’ by those in mainstream queer spaces and communities (Abraham, 2009: 88-89). Abraham further refers to this assumption among mainstream queer communities of the mutual exclusivity of religious and sexual identity as ‘hegemonic queer Islamophobia’ (Abraham, 2010), and the literature suggests that it also exists in many places outside Australia (Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2014; Minwalla, Rosser, Feldman, & Varga, 2005;

Rahman, 2014). Similarly to Abraham (2010), I have also observed that a consequence of hegemonic queer Islamophobia in Sydney is that LGBTIQ+ Muslims may feel as if they must forsake or downplay their Muslim identity in order to participate in queer spaces. In other words, LGBTIQ+ Muslims may feel a need to hide their spirituality in order to belong to a queer community, which does not provide any authentic sense of belonging and instead increases their sense of isolation.

Many of my research participants had experienced incidences of hegemonic queer Islamophobia and this had been a source of great disappointment to them. Seeking out queer spaces in Sydney and expecting to find acceptance and friendship, many same-sex attracted Muslims have instead experienced discrimination, racism or pity because of their religious or ethnic backgrounds. As Mehmet Ali, who is a 25-year-old gay Australian man of Turkish heritage, explains,

If you are queer and Muslim, it is easy to connect with the queer community – Sydney has no shortage of places where you can meet people. Even meetup.com can be a good place to start if you're lonely and maybe a little shy. The only issue with that is that you might still feel lonely because probably none of these people will ever really get you. They can be really friendly but when you tell them you're Muslim, then the questions come and suddenly all your problems would be magically solved if you just got over your faith. And if you get them to respect your religion it can be even worse! Like, they don't understand how I can share my bed with a guy, or maybe drink alcohol sometimes, but not want to eat bacon or dance about in my undies at Mardi Gras.

The fact that same-sex attracted and gender queer Muslims experience a lack of understanding, and often discrimination, from both Muslim communities and queer communities places them in a harrowing double bind and calls into question optimistic claims such as Herdt's contention that the recent emergence of gay and lesbian communities 'has transformed our culture and consciousness, creating radically new possibilities for men and women to "come out" and live more openly as homosexuals' (Herdt, 1998: 279). It is undeniably true that there are more freedoms and opportunities for same-sex attracted

people to live openly in Australia and many other places than there were as little as 30 years ago. However, those ‘radically new possibilities’ may be less numerous (or less radical) for minority groups such as same-sex attracted Muslims. As Mehmet Ali elaborated,

Sometimes the racism is right there in front of you and for some reason it's cool to say “no Arabs” or “no Middle Easterners” on your Grindr profile, or even to someone's face. That is not ok anywhere else.

As previously discussed, there are many negative stereotypes attached to Muslims in Australia and Sydney queer communities are not immune to their pervasive influence. These stereotypes particularly affect Arab migrants and Australians of Arab heritage and can create confusion for someone who is of Turkish heritage, like Mehmet Ali, about whether or not the anti-Middle Eastern discrimination applies to them or not.

Mehmet Ali’s perceived lack of acceptance was echoed by others with similar sentiments. Some complained that Sydney queer spaces, and Mardi Gras in particular, were ‘white washed’ and objected to elements of festivities that they saw as confirming commonly-held stereotypes held of non-heterosexuals involving drug use and promiscuity in particular. To illustrate, Salih, a 27-year-old Australian gay man of Turkish heritage, felt disengaged with the Mardi Gras festivities because he found what he described as ‘gay culture’ to be distasteful. As he explains,

I'm an ordinary guy. I have a white-collar office job. I have a Turkish boyfriend and we've been together two years. We do normal things like hit the beach or go to the movies on the weekend. Beyond the fact that I'm gay, I have nothing in common with that fancy-dress fuck fest. I think they're clowns. And if you go as a Muslim you have to dress up like one too, yeah? It's exoticised bullshit. Also, when they put the giant condom² on the obelisk – what was that all about? I know why people were upset about that. And then there's the parade with all the nearly-

² ACON, a LGBTI health promotion organisation based in Sydney, had an 18-meter tall pink condom placed over the obelisk in Sydney’s Hyde Park ahead of the 2016 Mardi Gras Parade to remind people of the importance of HIV prevention. For more information, please see the ABC news story at <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-02-27/giant-pink-condom-goes-onto-obelisk-at-hyde-park-in-sydney/7205162> (last accessed 20 June 2019)

naked people. It's a bit full on and I feel annoyed that it's come to represent gay culture. It's world famous, but to me it doesn't mean anything. It's about as fake as you can get.

Salih's perception, which he is not alone in holding, is that Mardi Gras is indeed a time for LGBTIQ+ pride, but only when those identities are narrowly defined and carefully curated to fit into a gay (or lesbian) stereotype. He and others also questioned the existence of the 'gay community', remarking that there are too many divisions to allow for much of a community to flourish. This observation has been made in literature discussing gay communities in Australia (Holt, 2011), as well as elsewhere (Barrett & Pollack, 2005; Teunis, 2007), with differences such as race, class and HIV status being identified as reasons underlying divisions. Some feel that there is not much space for true diversity within Mardi Gras, or even within local queer communities, because of widespread perceptions that Islam holds same-sex attracted Muslims back from living authentically as well as more negative claims that Islam is somehow a violent or repressive religion. Thus, some same-sex attracted Muslims, such as Mehmet Ali and Salih, feel as if they are outliers in Sydney queer communities and perceive a lack of understanding of the unique pressures and challenges they face as Muslims and as ethnic minorities in Australia as well as a lack of respect for the sometimes quite conservative values they may hold.

Conclusion and recommendations

This Report has sought to provide insight into some of the challenges that LGBTIQ+ Muslims in Sydney live with. In doing so, this Report has explored concepts such as ‘Muslim community’ and ‘Muslim identity’ in detail to help address tendencies in public discourse to stereotype the ways in which Muslims practice their religion and identify themselves. This has been necessary because such essentialist discourse seeps into the understandings of healthcare providers and queer communities and contributes to Islamophobia in spaces where Muslims seek support.

Other problematic public discourses that this Report counters are tension that is somehow thought to exist between being ‘fully Muslim’ and ‘fully Australian’ simultaneously as well as the belief that there is something inherently homophobic within Islam. The first step in challenging problematic perceptions is to raise awareness of the fact that they are, in fact, a problem. For LGBTIQ+ Muslims, the Islamophobia that they may encounter from mainstream Australian society, when combined with the homophobia that they may encounter from their ethnic and/or religious communities, can create a devastating sense of isolation and a belief that it is impossible to truly belong anywhere. Despite placing an emphasis on inclusion and acceptance, queer communities in Sydney are often no exception to this and LGBTIQ+ Muslims experience Islamophobia in spaces that they expected to be safe. In Sydney, as anywhere else that this dynamic occurs, this is a serious problem.

When Sydney Queer Muslims proposed the Pilot Program, it was with the intention of creating resources to address this problem and providing support to those affected by it. In doing so, we have been working closely with Imam Muhsin Hendricks as well as Milad Faeeh, whose reflections on providing counselling to LGBTIQ+ Muslims are included in this Report. The remainder of this Report consists of two sections dedicated to LGBTIQ+ Muslims relationships with their families and ethnic and/or religious communities as well as with queer communities in Sydney. These last two sections, which are taken from my PhD research on sexuality and gender diversity among Muslims in Sydney, provide context to the situations that Imam Muhsin Hendricks and Milad Faeeh describe in their reflections.

Hopefully, as a whole, this Report provides a nuanced picture of the challenges that LGBTIQ+ Muslims may face. With this in mind, the following recommendations will guide any non-Muslim organisation or entity that wishes to support LGBTIQ+ Muslims:

- 1.) **Acknowledge diversity:** Muslims vary widely in culture, practice and religiosity and many Muslims do not identify as belonging to a Muslim community at all. Do not make assumptions based on what ‘a Muslim’ is supposed to look like or how they are said to behave.
- 2.) **Promote cultural safety:** LGBTIQ+ Muslims should be put in contact with mental healthcare professionals or other support staff who understand and accept them. In social spaces that are designed to be inclusive, LGBTIQ+ Muslims should not have to contend with Islamophobic stereotypes or be put on the spot to defend Islam. Furthermore, wherever possible, a priority should be placed on granting scholarship funding to LGBTIQ+ Muslims who wish to study to become a mental healthcare professional in order to support their own community.
- 3.) **Promote spiritual safety:** Although spiritual healing may not be a high priority for secular-based counsellors, it is often of great importance to LGBTIQ+ Muslims who seek to reconcile their sexuality and/or gender identity with their faith. When supporting LGBTIQ+ Muslims, effort should be made to provide them with the resources necessary for this spiritual healing to take place.
- 4.) **Respect risks:** LGBTIQ+ Muslims should not be pressured to ‘come out’ or to engage in activities that may have the potential to create backlash within a community they are part of. While it is important to include LGBTIQ+ Muslims within queer spaces and invite them to express their sexuality and/or gender identity freely, it is also important to consider the factors outlined in this Report that may prevent this.
- 5.) **Decolonise research:** When engaging in research with LGBTIQ+ Muslims, be aware that the categories and concepts used to articulate Anglo Western LGBTIQ+

experience may not capture the experience of LGBTIQ+ people from different cultural groups. For this reason, qualitative methods that involve establishing a relationship of trust with research participants are highly recommended.

6.) **Decolonise support:** When supporting LGBTIQ+ Muslims here in Australia, there may be a temptation to expand and establish a means of supporting LGBTIQ+ Muslims overseas. Sydney Queer Muslims endorses connecting LGBTIQ+ Muslims overseas with resources as appropriate to help them organise themselves or to enable them to survive in their own societies. However, it is strongly not recommended to independently campaign for change in an unfamiliar cultural context overseas.

7.) **Re-evaluate evaluations:** The LGBTIQ+ Muslim community in Sydney is small. Fundraising for any small group is difficult because many grant applications measure impact in terms of how many people a project or program can reach. Impact can be difficult to measure among LGBTIQ+ Muslims because there are reasons, as discussed earlier in this Report, that LGBTIQ+ Muslims may not want to be seen publicly or have their name added to any sort of database or list that would identify them as queer. However, this does not mean that resources aimed to support LGBTIQ+ Muslims have little impact. In the case of Sydney Queer Muslims, for example, the number of attendees at workshops or group therapy sessions may have been small when compared to events held by queer organisations that appeal to a larger demographic base but the impact was great, and in some cases, lifesaving. For some LGBTIQ+ Muslims, simply knowing that these gatherings were held was a great comfort alone. Moreover, web-based resources, such as video clips, can reach a limitless number of people both here in Australia as well as overseas. The impact of these kinds of resources is difficult to quantify with traditional metrics. As such, the evaluation of the success of resources that are designed to support LGBTIQ+ Muslims must be based on feedback from the community instead of on numbers-based key performance indicators.

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