

Destination



EQUALITY

winter 2015/16

“The Catholic Church needs its own Stonewall”

Interview with
Krzysztof Charamsa

Reconciling
sexual orientation,
gender identity,
gender expression
and

RELIGION

LGBTI Christians, Muslims and Buddhists
speak about their experiences



Evelyne Paradis,
Executive Director

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I have a confession to make. And not just because it is a topical means of beginning this edition of our magazine. As executive director of ILGA-Europe, I must acknowledge that our movement as a whole has let a gap emerge. Within the LGBTI movement, religion has been a taboo subject for so long; and as such, it has been difficult to know where to begin the conversation. Now we are engaging in this conversation and, like for any dialogue, we must start from a place of honesty.

Of course, for years, we have critiqued the institutions and structures built up around different faiths when their actions and statements have caused people direct pain. But we have overlooked the core beliefs that are at the heart of those institutions, as well as the common values that we might share. We have not sought to bridge the conversation on equality and the conversation on faith. By doing so, we gave space for messages telling people to pick ‘one side’ or ‘the other’ to abound. We allowed the idea that you cannot identify as LGBTI and have faith to fester. And as a result, we are guilty of having excluded a particular section of the LGBTI community, of causing LGBTI people of faith great difficulty by indirectly condoning the messages telling

people they must tear away one very personal part of the fabric of their life.

Just because the LGBTI community wasn’t leading the conversation doesn’t mean that there was silence on the intersection of religion and beliefs, sexual orientation and gender identity. Far from it. And by not engaging with the issue for so long, we have also conceded ground to anti-equality groups who claimed that particular space with relish. It is all too common to hear that “it’s a battle of ‘gay versus god’”, that campaigns for LGBTI equality are essentially campaigns against religions, when this is simply not true.

This magazine is a step towards recognising the immense power that comes from addressing issues like this directly, not shying away from it. One central message that weaves its way through many of the articles in the following pages is that religion and belief and being a member of the LGBTI community are not mutually exclusive. By talking openly about the importance of belief, we can dispel the myth that you can love or be true to your own identity or believe, but not both at the same time. Many people have kindly agreed to share their personal stories in this issue on how they experience their faith as LGBTI persons, each voice providing a unique perspective from different faith or world view.

Ultimately, as a human rights organisation, it is also our role to reclaim the conversation around religion. We cannot perpetuate the idea that fundamental rights sit together in a hierarchical arrangement. The right to freedom of religion and belief is incredibly important, in the same way that the right to equality and to freedom from discrimination because of your sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression is. Lots of the articles emphasis this fact but they do not stop there; they go beyond merely making the argument and give us practical tips on how to advance equality for all. This magazine can help interested individuals and NGOs alike plan advocacy work that benefits both LGBTI groups and faith-based organisations.

I’m reminded of a comment that archbishop and human rights advocate Desmond Tutu made in July 2013: “I would not worship a God who is homophobic and that is how deeply I feel about this.” I personally feel that this is how so many people think based on their religion, faith or belief. And that is our opportunity to make the present a more open, understanding and inclusive place to be for everyone.

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Lifting our voices: reconciling religion, gender and sexual orientation

Robin Sclafani, Director of CEJI-A Jewish Contribution to an Inclusive Europe and Vice Chair of the European Network on Religion and Belief (ENORB).



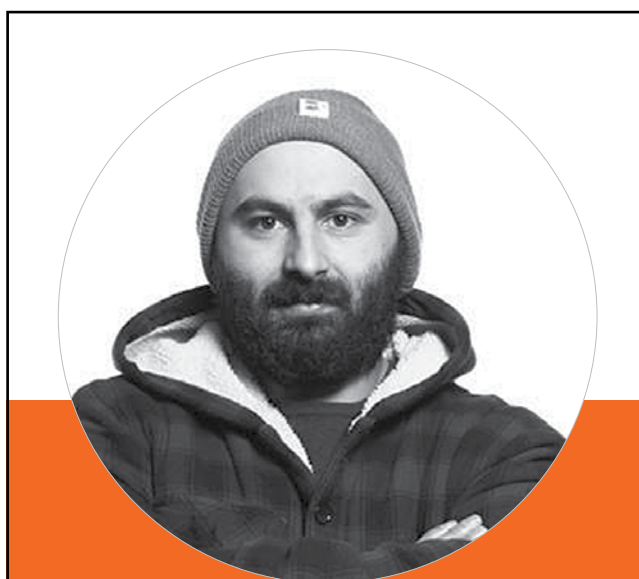
Like so many people who are committed to LGBTI rights and to freedom of religion, it is painful to experience the opposition or hostility which can sometimes be expressed between groups that advocate exclusively for one or the other freedom. Inclusive societies must include all our diversities, and human rights for one group cannot be at the expense of another group. It is only within this all-encompassing paradigm that we will ever achieve true equality for all.

Legal frameworks and case law provide an important mechanism through which the balance of rights can be clarified and potential conflicts of interest can be resolved. The legal tensions and opportunities in human rights law are well explained in the research paper by Dr. Alice Donald and Dr. Erica Howard from Middlesex University on “The Right to Freedom of Religion or Belief and its Intersection with Other Rights,” commissioned by ILGA Europe and published in January 2015 (see summary of this paper on pages 6&7 of this magazine). But such cases will always leave one side unsatisfied and will unlikely lead to a transformation at the source of intolerance.

The question which we at CEJI – A Jewish Contribution to an Inclusive Europe have been dealing with in the anti-bias training work we do is how to “reconcile religion, gender and sexual orientation” in order to reduce the perception and reality of opposition among these three elements of diversity. Our training takes a nested approach to learning. Insights, implications and connections are found by examining the individual, communal, and societal levels. With a starting point that honours these three dimensions of every person’s multi-faceted identity, it becomes more difficult to divide people along the fault lines of “us” and “them”, and participants are able to approach the practical issues of living together more constructively. For example, when bringing together representatives of an LGBTI group and a religious group(s), it is important to take time in the process for everyone to realise that LGBTI people have beliefs and perhaps subscribe to a particular

faith. We also must recognise that those from the religious side also have a sexual orientation and may even be LGBTI themselves.

It is only in the last few decades that LGBTI freedoms have begun to be normalised in certain spaces and parts of the world. The experience of rejection, betrayal, denial or exclusion of LGBTI people is still in living memory. In many places, it is still present. The poles of greatest resistance to LGBTI rights today are often



Bekim Asani, FYR of Macedonia

“ Its hard to be Muslim, Albanian and adopted child and to live in small city...It gets harder when you speak loud about LGBT rights... But what keeps me going is to work with a diverse community where Albanians, Macedonians, Turks, Romas live together. I also believe in all inclusive Islam because it’s faith of peace. ”



propped up by religious arguments, and despite strong theological contradictions, many have come to view “religion” and therefore “religious people” as inherently homophobic.

The problem is that religious texts such as the Bible say very little about some subjects, such as homosexuality. Popular attitudes about those matters are determined much more by other sources such as scientific information, social changes and personal experience. Interpretation of religious text is the way in which it has real-life meaning. Over the last 50 years there has been a long list of books, theologians and religious leaders who have theologically refuted the idea that homosexuality is a sin.

To complicate matters, there is also the reality of religious discrimination in Europe today, especially in employment and housing. Incidents of hate crimes are rising in many countries, an escalation of political discourse against Muslims in particular, and a series of policies this last decade are seen as an attack on religious freedom. It is ironic that some of these policies are justified in the name of women’s rights, yet it is Muslim women who are most often the victims of hate crime perpetrated by non-Muslims.

As the multicultural fabric of Europe continues to diversify, and this includes communities that may be more culturally or religiously traditionalist, there will be increasing demand on LGBTI support groups to provide a safe and welcoming space for

people who are struggling to reconcile their sexual orientations with their religio-cultural roots. Prejudices will need to be confronted, within their families of origin, but also within the LGBTI movement, if intersectionality is to be properly addressed and if truly inclusive community groups are to be created.

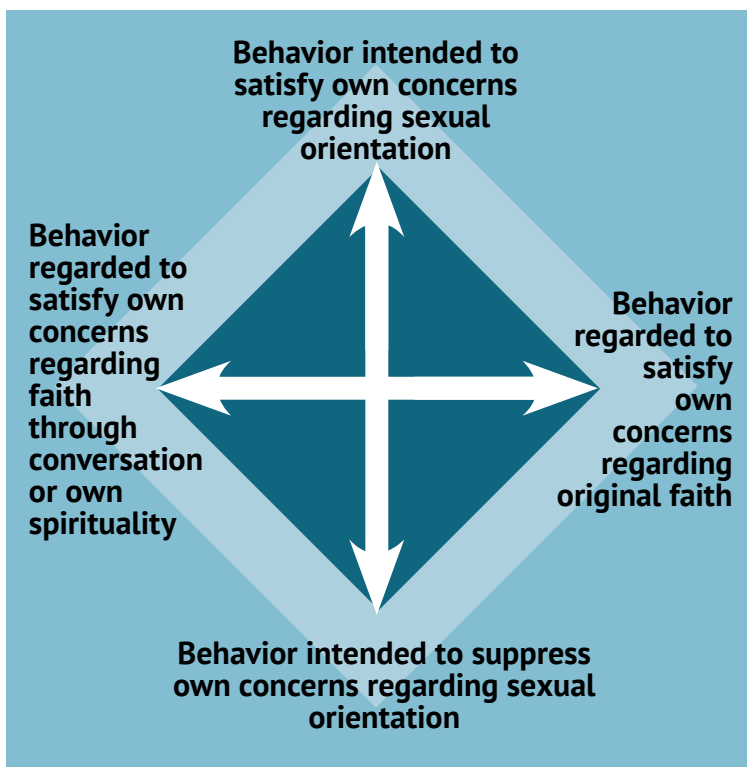
In the face of exclusion and bias both within their religio-cultural communities of origin and within the mainstream LGBTI movement, one of the ways LGBTI people of faith have created safe spaces is by creating separate LGBTI communities of faith. This is one possible solution, emerging from the possibility to connect with others who share particular intersections of identity.

There is so much to learn from the ways LGBTI people of faith have reconciled these dimensions of identity within themselves, and how faith-based LGBTI communities have harmonized values, beliefs and traditions into a coherent whole.

In one of our CEJI training activities, we take real personal stories of reconciliation from across a range of religio-cultural contexts and ask participants to place these stories within the four quadrants in this diagram. This leads people to reflect upon their own experiences and choices, and also to become more aware of the prejudices they may have about the choices other people have made to feel at peace within themselves.

Within the European Network on Religion and Belief (ENORB), faith-based organisations that are not defined as LGBTI have taken on the challenge of addressing LGBTI inclusion. In order to confront anti-religious bias, it is necessary to lift the voices of religious people who are committed to equality for all, which includes LGBTI people. ENORB members believe that there is much in common between the fight for religious freedom and the fight for LGBTI rights. We should show solidarity for all human rights by not shying away from tough issues, but rather, by tackling them head-on and thus reduce intolerance within and towards our respective communities.

Over the last two years, ENORB and ILGA-Europe have held a series of joint seminars, at European and at national levels, to open up the possibilities for dialogue and cooperation. Some of the issues which we have discovered to be of joint concern are: hate crime, dress and symbols, freedom of assembly and inclusive education. Several ENORB members have also organised discussions within their religious communities, sometimes involving ILGA-Europe members, about the spiritual values as well as anti-discrimination commitments which should drive them towards a more pro-active approach to LGBTI inclusion. We believe it is the responsibility of faith-based communities to provide a welcoming and safe environment for all of their





members. The struggle to achieve this is not done, but we are proud of the progress which is being made.

We have learnt a lot about ourselves and about our faiths in this process. And it is a process; a process that requires

trust-building, active listening, and a sincere consideration of each others' needs and experiences. We must frame the issues as shared issues in a shared society based on a set of common values. These are the key ingredients for creating a culture where respect for diversity and equal rights will finally thrive.

Shared Principles for Dialogue and Cooperation

ENORB (European Network of Religion and Belief) ILGA-Europe (European Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association)

Recognising our common humanity, ILGA-Europe and ENORB come together to affirm our shared commitment to the fundamental belief that all human beings are created equal in dignity and rights.

Our organisations agree that who we are, who we love, and what we believe in can never justify denying anyone their human rights. In particular, we share the belief in:

- The right to safety and security for everyone, including protection by the State
- The right to equality and non-discrimination, that everyone is entitled to enjoy all human rights without discrimination on any ground
- The right to freedom of expression and association
- The right to an inclusive education and safe school environment

Our struggles are connected and we therefore need to stand up together and in solidarity against any form of intolerance.

We recognise that there is an inherent diversity in humankind, that there are different opinions and beliefs, different ways of living and expressing one's self, different ways of loving and expressing love. Mutual respect and our shared commitment to human rights are our guiding principles in building bridges between our two organisations and our communities.

Our two organisations are committed to working together in accordance with a human rights based approach, in particular in ensuring active participation, dialogue and empowerment of all.



Leyla Jagiella, Germany

“ As a Muslim transwoman I am happy to have found traditions, sources and social spaces in Islam that affirm my identity, support me with love and strengthen my faith. But from my past I know that not having access to these assets can be a painful experience while searching for ones place in this world. More work still needs to be done, both within the Muslim community and within European mainstream societies not informed about the vast diversity of Muslim experiences. ”

The right to freedom of religion or belief and its intersection with other rights

Erica Howard, Associate Professor in Law, School of Law, Middlesex University, London, UK.

This article was inspired by a longer research paper by Erica Howard and Alice Donald, written for ILGA-Europe in 2015. The research paper, of the same name, explains the rights to freedom of religion or belief, the right to be free from religious discrimination and freedom from discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity. These rights are often said to be in conflict, either with each other or with other fundamental human rights. The report sets out a framework, based on international human rights law, for the practical resolution of these situations of apparent conflict. This framework sets out some principles and useful ground rules for negotiating a practical resolution in these cases.

P R I N C I P L E S

Non-discrimination

This means that there is 'no right to discriminate'. In relation to the freedom of religion or belief, any restriction should not be discriminatory in the sense that it impacts on the followers of one religion or belief more harshly than another. In respect of claims for religiously-motivated refusals to provide goods or services to same-sex couples, courts have consistently held either that the requirement to provide goods and services to the public in a non-discriminatory way is not an interference with religious freedom, or that such interference is justified by the goal of combating discrimination.

Neutrality and impartiality

The state is required to act in a neutral fashion as between religions and as between religious and non-religious forms of belief. This means that any protection or restriction should be generic and not focused on a particular religion or belief.

Respect for the right of others to believe

The principle may be summarised as respecting the believer rather than the belief.

It is key when assessing the necessity of any interference with the manifestation of a religion or belief. It establishes the duty of the state to create a 'level playing field' between different groups, including both those with religious or non-religious beliefs and those with no religion or belief, with one side being free to present their point of view, and the other to reject it.

Institutional and personal autonomy

Freedom of religion or belief under international human rights law doesn't just protect individuals, it also includes communities and organisations. The right to freedom of religion (along with the right to freedom of association) thus protects religious organisations and communities from state intrusion into their associative life and governance. It also protects them from state intrusion into doctrinal or other internal disputes, to the extent that this is compatible with the rights and freedoms of others. Personal autonomy is protected under Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights which protects the right to respect for private and family life, home and correspondence. This protection covers same-sex relationships.

Proportionality

The concept of justification plays an important part in both human rights and anti-discrimination measures. Claims under either are often unsuccessful because the interference or restriction is considered to be justified. To be justified, a restriction must have a legitimate aim and the means used to achieve this aim must be proportionate and necessary. This means that all interests at stake (the rights of the individual and the interests of the state, employer, service provider or the rights of others) must be considered and balanced against each other. Whether a restriction is proportionate depends very much on the facts of each particular case. This means that the outcome of an individual case cannot be used as a basis for making abstract determinations about competing rights or the outcome of any other specific case.

The last principle is the principle of legality

This principle means that restrictions on the right to manifest one's religion or belief must not be arbitrary or irrational. They must be clear, publicly accessible, non-retrospective. People must be able to understand the circumstances in which restrictions might be imposed. They should be able to foresee the consequences of their actions if they do not conform to the restrictions, with a degree of accuracy.

These human rights based principles can be used in courts and tribunals but can also prove very useful in the wider public sphere too. They can be used in any situation where a conflict of rights might arise. It is suggested that differences should be negotiated outside the courts and that litigation should be avoided, where possible. This is based on the view that litigation does not resolve the conflict but rather makes it worse; the adversarial character of a court case tends to magnify underlying tensions and put parties in opposite corners, each stressing their own identities.

No hierarchy of rights

Human rights law rejects the notion of a hierarchy of rights. In situations of competing rights, the proportionality analysis is not a 'zero sum' game, in which a gain for one side necessarily entails a corresponding loss for the other. Rather, such situations require a compromise from both sides. In each instance, an attempt should be made to maximise each of the rights engaged and to ensure that none is inappropriately sacrificed.

Pluralism and tolerance

Pluralism and tolerance are fostered by the application of some of the principles we have already mentioned, namely state neutrality, impartiality and respect. However, the principle of fostering pluralism and tolerance is also viewed as a goal in its own right because it is a means of preserving democracy. It requires that religious adherents accept that their belief systems will be challenged. But the same also applies to non-believers. They have to tolerate manifestations of religion or belief which they might find unpalatable. There is no right not to be offended and the role of the state here is to encourage and promote tolerance.

G R O U N D R U L E S

The following are suggested as ground rules for negotiating differences outside the courts.

- Good faith and reciprocity, including an openness to the other's point of view and honesty in all communication.
- Mutual respect for the right of all to express views, whatever they might be; respect for the other person and their identity. This also includes having a non-judgemental approach towards the other person.
- A willingness to listen to all views and to engage in mediation, negotiation and conciliation to resolve differences, avoiding litigation wherever possible.
- An awareness of the need to avoid essentialising religions or beliefs or misattributing certain views or values to entire groups or communities.
- A commitment to invoking legal cases in public debate in an accurate and socially-contextualised way. Cases have often been reported or partially misreported and then this is used as evidence of the existence of wider conflicts. Erroneous reporting of high-profile cases may make tensions between religion/belief and other interests appear more prevalent and intractable than they actually are.

Conscience on Trial

Lorenzo Zucca, Professor of Law and Philosophy, King's College London.

There is no right to conscientious objection. By this, I mean that individuals – like Kim Davis – have no moral claim against the state that requires them to perform duties that they regard incompatible with their own religious beliefs. (Kim Davis is a country clerk in Kentucky, USA who gained international attention after defying a federal court order requiring that she issues marriage licenses following the US Supreme Court decision in 2015 opening marriage to same-sex couples.) In this case, Kim Davis cannot object to record same sex marriages on the grounds that they are incompatible with her Christian faith.

When I say that there is no right to conscientious objection, I mean that there is no moral right to conscientiously object to the obligations set by ordinary law. Of course, the law can

carve out exemptions, but exemptions must be explicitly mentioned as part of the law in order to be taken into account. To allow for other implicit exemptions on the ground of private conscience would only undermine the point of law, which is to set equal rights and obligations for all citizens with no discrimination.

Public officials such as Kim Davis are, if anything, under a heightened obligation to apply the law without questioning it. Being a public official requires precisely that. If a public official finds it particularly demanding to apply the law, then chances are that they are not the right person for the job. As a matter of personal mental health, they would be better off with another type of job.

Just to be clear, legislation can identify people to whom the law does not apply. For example, they can set out a category of conscientious objectors who will be exempted from going to war. To this extent, the legislative power can recognize the existence of a special right to conscientious objection. The right is special, and not general, which means that it applies in very special circumstances, i.e. the circumstances of war. The legislative power has several practical reasons for creating such exemptions:

1. No country wants to enrol people in its army who will be highly detrimental to the morale of their battalion.
2. Some individuals would be incapable of carrying out the obligations under military draft.
3. The legitimacy of the military draft is enhanced by a limited option to opt out from it; exemptions in this field show that the state is not in the business of blindly coercing individuals to go to war.

A special legal right to conscientious objection is nowhere near a general constitutional right to conscientious objection. This means that courts have no unfettered discretion to examine individual claims of conscience of individuals and decide whether they qualify as an indent of ordinary legislation. Laws, democratically enacted, provide strong moral reasons to act in the prescribed way. It is very hard to imagine that individual conscience will provide reasons that are strong enough to counter the reasons embedded in ordinary legislation. To allow



Dounia Jari, The Netherlands

“ To me there is no logic in leaving my beloved Muslim faith. Neither is it logic to me to not practice my bisexuality. So I decided to empower myself and reconcile these two parts of my identity. It is hard at times, when I get excluded by intolerant Muslims. But Allah gives me strength in my journey! ”

for a general constitutional right to conscientious objection would amount to courting anarchy and undermining the very legitimacy of political institutions that rule in the name of all citizens.

Does it mean that accommodation of religious individuals is never possible? No, it does not. That would be an unfortunate predicament that conflates generality of legal obligations with their rigidity. No law should be rigid to the breaking point. So if the law's point can be fulfilled together with accommodation, then we should not insist on the rigidity of legal obligation. For example, if the office run by Kim Davis could have offered registration of same sex marriages, i.e. by allowing another officer to sign the document, then Kim Davis could have safely asked to be accommodated. But Kim Davis's point was that the whole office should not have participated in this endeavour. She wanted the state's office to act as commanded by her conscience, and this is obviously unacceptable.

Contrast it with the European case of Ladele, the London registrar who simply wanted to quietly refrain from signing those certificates in particular. This did not mean that the certificates would not be produced, on the contrary. It simply meant that someone else would have to sign them. Mrs Ladele was put on the spot by her colleagues, while she simply wanted to keep it under the radar. Her job began way before same-sex marriages was legal, so she could not expect to have to perform that task one day. This does not make her stance moral, nor does she have a moral right to conscientiously object. What she does have is a claim to be treated fairly; she can reasonably claim that accommodating her position would not undermine the right of same-sex couples to get a certificate. In the long run, she may still want to look for another job. But again, that is a matter for her to decide. In the meantime, it is possible to give her some time and to assign some other obligations to her.

Is Mrs Ladele harming anyone anyway? Some suggest that her stance should be plainly and simply eradicated from public administration; there is no place for views that are discriminatory. But, as I said, there is no tangible evidence of discrimination being perpetrated here. Same-sex certificates will be delivered without fail. No request will ever be rejected (which was the case with Kim Davis's office). So where does the harm lie? It is suggested by those who maintain a hard line that the harm is dignitary; by keeping on the pay roll someone who holds those opinions, the administration is tacitly accepting a view of the world that should be eradicated, at least from public offices.

My reply is that we should not engage in a witch-hunt, unless beliefs are followed by actions that make it impossible for one category of people to have equal access to all the services offered by the state. It is important to understand that morally speaking discriminatory behaviour should be prohibited, but it is less than prudent to persecute all forms of beliefs. Persecutions of belief can be left in the hands of religious extremists, but should not be the goal of secular, tolerant and open-minded democracies.



Munisha, UK/Sweden



My name is Munisha, the name I was given at my ordination as a member of the Triratna Buddhist Order in 2003. It's an ancient Indian name meaning "She who has the power or mastery of a sage; one moved by inward impulse; inspired; ecstatic; an enthusiast". At my best it's what I most deeply am; it's also something to grow into. I'm British and live in Stockholm with my Swedish Buddhist partner, who is also ordained.

Brought up Christian, I was inspired by the beauty of spiritual life but concerned to find an ethical code I could respect, knowing myself to be lesbian. Becoming disillusioned with lesbian and gay activism, I encountered the Triratna Buddhist Order (then known as the Western Buddhist Order) at the age of 29 and immediately responded to Buddhism's five ethical precepts and its clear path of training in meditation and ethics, leading to wisdom.

Refreshingly, in Triratna sexual orientation seems largely irrelevant to the spiritual life. LGBT people are Triratna, alongside everyone else. They can be found at every level of teaching and administrative responsibility, with the same failings and gifts as anyone else; the same limitless potential for the perfect wisdom and compassion of Enlightenment.





Visibility and audibility – the keys to building capacity for queer Muslims

Dino Suhonic, **Chairman of Maruf Foundation, European Queer Muslim Network.**

The relationship between Islam, Muslims and sexual diversity seems to be the one of the biggest issues in Western societies and Muslim communities. A lot of discussion about this issue is happening online, but also in the mainstream media. One could easily get the impression that Islam and LGBTI people are mutually exclusive. But is that true?

Since the US Supreme Court declared the ban on same-sex marriage illegal, the discussion in the United States has exploded. Support for this ruling came from various quarters; celebrities and progressive politicians in particular praised the decision. But many conservative Christians and Republicans responded with troubled statements like “tough times for America,” or “we have lost the way of the Bible.” The discussion is also conducted within the Muslim community in the US and has spread to the rest of the world. Interestingly enough, the views of some Muslims are very similar to those of American conservatives. Many Muslims who are active on social media mainly hide themselves behind religious laws, declaring: “It is not about my personal views; Islam is against gay people.”

These opinions obviously fall within the freedom of religious belief and to have one’s own interpretation. In another sense, they leave queer Muslims with ambiguous feelings. For a straight Muslim, it is easy to choose a view: you are either for or against same-sex marriage. But for a queer Muslim, this is a difficult dilemma. It is about your sexual orientation as well as your religious identity. Often one has to choose between the two identities. Ultimately this struggle happens at home, within your family. In some cases this culminates in dramatic circumstances, with rejection by family or community and sometimes even physical violence.

It has to be noted that there is a difference between what Muslims, imams or scholars say and what Islam is. Islam has many sects, theological teachings and different schools of jurisprudence. The interpretations of the Quran, as well as of the Hadith (the tradition of the Prophet Muhammed) vary widely from very conservative to very liberal and progressive. Conservative voices are becoming louder within contemporary Muslim discourse. The ideas of imams like Fawaz Jneid and Bilal

Philips, who regularly make homophobic statements, have become an obstacle in the struggle for a better position of queer Muslims. While some of them are calling for gay men to be thrown off the highest buildings, others state that violence against LGBTI people is prohibited even though they still reject the rights of queer people.

Fortunately, there is also a lot of support. In the US and Canada, many Muslims like Reza Aslan, Hasan Minhaj, Wajahat Ali, Junaid Jahangir and others have spoken out positively about same-sex marriage. Support was also forthcoming from Sultan Sooud Al-Qassemi, Ahmed Shibab-Eldin and Imran Garda who specifically addressed conservative Muslims. Because of their stance, these people have been threatened and harassed.

The current level of public discourse by many Muslims and non-Muslims alike remains scandalously ignorant of the work that progressive scholars have done for the Muslim community. Scott Siraj al-Haqq Kugle, Amina Wadud, Omar Nahas, Kecia Ali, Serena Tolino, Sara Omar are just some of these voices. Gay imams (sometimes called “pink imams”) like Muhsin Hendricks, Abdellah Daaiye and Ludovic Mohammed-Zahed have a very important role to play in the discussion. Many queer Muslim activists have raised their voices for more than twenty years: El-Farouk Khaki, Faisal Alam, Tawseef Khan, Beki Asani and many others. Furthermore, so-called “all inclusive mosques” are safe havens for all Muslims regardless of their sexual orientation, ethnic background or religious sect. This concept exists in Toronto, Washington, London, Paris, Cape Town and other cities where the leaders of this movement are working on true unity.

A significant problem is that queer Muslims are often objectified. Their ‘narratives’ are used for different external purposes, often with good intentions. But in this way they also serve as examples that show “how much difficulty the Muslim community has with homosexuality”. Of course much work still has to be done, but the stories of queer Muslims are abused by right-wing social and political movements. Such framing is used exclusively towards migrant communities and has a clear message: “If you don’t accept gays, then you do not belong here.” It’s important to make a



statement against the discrimination of LGBTI people, but we have to keep in mind that the greatest burden falls on us, the LGBTI people that are part of the Muslim community. The “Muslim Others” are our mothers, fathers, families and friends.

At the end of the day, queer Muslims experience racism and discrimination because of their skin colour, ethnicity, religious identity and even their names. This multiple discrimination creates very unfavorable conditions for them to flourish in society. One of the biggest obstacles in the journey of queer Muslims is the lack of visibility at different levels. Visibility is important, but it has to be in a form that is orchestrated by queer Muslims themselves.

In addition to visibility, we also have to stimulate “audibility”. How many queer Muslims sit on the board of gay advocacy organisations, are policy makers in a community or project managers of international human rights organisations? If we do not have enough capacity within the queer Muslim field for this, we must invest in building that capacity. In last few months, a new initiative has been launched: the European Queer Muslim Network. Ten queer Muslim activists from all over Europe have come together to share their expertise and support each other. While not yet a formal network, this cooperation might create a safe and effective platform of different organisations that can empower queer Muslims and create a sustainable movement.

Tearing down walls of prejudices

Florin Buhuceanu,
European Forum of LGBT Christian Groups.



In recent years, the anti-equality opposition backed by religious groups are creatively using a human rights discourse to discredit and undermine LGBTI rights. They do this by framing the freedom of religion in direct opposition to equality and non-discrimination provisions, considering one fundamental right to surpass the other fundamental rights. The fight is motivated by presenting LGBTI rights as an insult to religious traditions, local cultural norms and national identities. Freedom of religion and the rights of the majority are perceived as endangered, therefore the state



Antons Mozalevskis, Latvia

“ My name is Antons, I am a medical doctor working currently for World Health Organization. People could call me a Buddhist, but I would say I am just practicing Dharma, which means I am trying to be useful for the world and learn how to experience the true nature of mind – love and wisdom, according to Buddha’s teachings. I don’t believe in Gods or anything supernatural, I think the world itself is an endless beautiful play of space. I would say I am really lucky to have friends, including my husband, who think the same way. I feel obliged to share my happiness with others. ”

and the church should act to better protect “human rights of the majority”, “natural family” and “public morals”.

Dismantling this distressing ‘God versus LGBTI’ argument and promoting a values-based narrative is the focus of the European Forum of LGBT Christian Groups’ advocacy work. The European Forum was instrumental in creating, supporting and running an advocacy network that raised awareness of homosexuality as a topic and advanced LGBT issues within World Council of Churches. We played an important role as a witness during The Family Synod of the Roman Catholic Church for 2014 and 2015 on reconciling sexual orientation and faith. We have also contributed to shaping an Orthodox LGBTI perspective to “come out” to the Pan Orthodox Synod, an event planned for Istanbul in the summer of 2016.

Being faithful to our people living in difficult contexts in Eastern Europe remains important, due to the persistence of the religion-based homophobia, biphobia and transphobia in the region. A new generation of LGBT faith activists is emerging. We are quite confident that they will be able to mainstream the LGBTI agenda in our societies and move it beyond the human rights vocabulary. These voices need to be heard if we take seriously the ideal of an open society, free of militant prejudice and bigotry.

From Pride to Enlightenment: how does your sexuality relate to your sense of self? How enlightened is Buddhism on LGBTI-issues? What would the Buddha say if he met a trans person?

Buddhism covers a very wide variety of traditions which makes it hard to speak about 'a Buddhist' point of view on anything, let alone LGBTI-rights. Nonetheless, there is great agreement among mainstream Western Buddhists on certain principles. These points of consensus are reflected in the actions of the European Buddhist Union (EBU), Europe's largest association of Buddhist organisations.

1. Pragmatic solutions over dogmatic slogans:

The Buddha (5th century BCE) actually did meet trans people. Some even asked to join his community; the Buddhist canon reports the case of a trans monk and a trans nun, who were not happy in their community (Vinaya III.35). The Buddha ruled that the monk should join the nuns and the nun should join the monks. To my knowledge, this is the oldest documented story on the intersection of religious and LGBTI rights. It is also worth noting that the Buddha does not condemn (or even make negative statements about) sexual minorities at any point in the canonical scripts. All he said is that we should not use sex harmfully and that celibates should abstain from sex, gay or straight.

It might be difficult for Abrahamic religions to understand that Buddhism does not reject or promote certain sexual activities as such. Buddhist methodology is non-dogmatic. Its moral focus is the avoidance of suffering, in this case by one's sexual behaviour. Therefore, most Buddhists do not condemn LGBTI sexual activity, as long as the partners agree to it, neither is under vows of celibacy, and that the activity does not harm others.

2. Non-violence:

The debate on LGBTI rights is often poisoned by severe hate speech. Buddhism tries to avoid this by constantly reminding everyone that we have a lot in common – we all want to avoid suffering, we all search for happiness. Buddhism firmly rejects all forms of verbal and physical violence, including those against sexual minorities.

In the Council of Europe, the EBU is a member of the Conference of International NGOs. As chair of the Human Rights Committee, EBU representative Michel Aguilar has been working hard with his colleagues on anti-hate speech programmes. The 'No Hate Web – No Hate Speech' symposium for example, which looked to survey the various aspects of hate speech and give people a tool to deal with hate speech on line. You can read more at: www.europeanbuddhism.org/news/council-of-europe-no-hate-web-no-hate-speech/

3. Non-discrimination and human rights:

Most readers will remember the brave speech made by UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon to the UN Human Rights Council in 2012. He made a strong appeal to *"tackle the violence, decriminalise same-sex relationships, end discrimination and educate the public."* Representatives from some Muslim countries walked out and refused to even listen to his speech. The EBU wanted to react in a different way, writing an open letter the same month. The letter concluded: *"We ask the leaders of the other religions and philosophies to engage with us in the above calls to stand up and speak out loudly and clearly against violence and discrimination towards sexual minorities and aim for the full recognition of human rights for all."*

You can see the full letter at www.europeanbuddhism.org/news/openlettermarch2012/

Also in 2012, the EBU adopted a new 'Statement of Mission and Vision', which reflects the Buddhist commitment to non-discrimination: *"We support the implementation of Human Rights, equality and individual responsibility for all, regardless of ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, language, religion, nationality, social origins, birth status or any other distinction."*

The EBU is also a founding member of ENORB (the European Network on Religion and Belief). In another contribution in this magazine, Robin Sclafani reports how ENORB and ILGA-Europe have been working together for some years.

4. Respect for diversity:

It is true that talking about sexual minorities is still taboo in many Asian countries, including traditional Buddhist countries. Most Western Buddhists consider this a cultural, rather than a Buddhist, thing. However, even those (Asian) scholars who think homosexuality is a breach of Buddhist precepts never advocate hate-speech, let alone aggression. The Dalai Lama belongs to such a tradition (this was first described as such by Ganpopa (1079-1153), notably only in Tibet and 17 centuries after the Buddha). Nevertheless, the Dalai Lama emphasises that is no reason to reject or discriminate against LGBTI people. Unlike Europe, there is no history of homophobic violence in Buddhist cultures.

In the Report of the Council of Europe on 'Religion and Human Rights' (2010) the EBU recommended: *"Buddhism makes a clear distinction between the Buddhist point of view and society's viewpoint. The secular society should strive for full equality and non-discrimination amongst all its citizens, including sexual minorities. Buddhism has no religious objections towards a secular same-sex-marriage and many Buddhist institutions perform religious blessings or marriages for same-sex couples."* (Chapter 5 'Sexual Orientation and Sexual Gender Identity')

5. Inclusive, spiritual support

So, what if you are Buddhist and gay? Last year, the EBU started several networks on topics of shared interest. One of these is the Rainbow Sangha, which aims to address the spiritual concerns of the Buddhist LGBTI community in Europe and to provide news and information about Buddhism and LGBTI to interested people. We try to connect people and make sure they don't feel isolated. Find out more at www.europeanbuddhism.org/activity/rainbow/

In summary, the attitude of mainstream Western Buddhists towards sexual minorities is reflected by the following quote of Soto Zen priest Daizu MacPhillamy: ***"Homosexuality is not an impediment to Enlightenment and gay people are welcome in Buddhist training. How could it be otherwise? How could love between any sentient beings be contrary to the Buddha Nature?"***



**Rev Sharon Ferguson,
United Kingdom**

“

I identify as a gender queer lesbian Christian. I was born into a family that only went to church for births, funerals and weddings and they found it very strange that I had this desire to go to church but I simply cannot remember a time when I didn't have a close relationship with God. Consequently, as soon as I was able I started attending church on a regular basis. When I was 23 years old I came out as a lesbian. At this time I was not going to any particular church and found it easier to continue to 'church hop' as it avoided any awkward questions. Discovering my sexual orientation didn't affect my relationship with God but I soon discovered that my sexuality wasn't always acceptable to church communities and also that my faith was not readily accepted by the LGBT community. Eventually I started living in an area where there was a Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) which has a ministry to the LGBT community and my calling to ordained ministry became very strong. After ordination I worked for the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement (LGCM) where I had the opportunity to promote that faith and sexuality/gender identity are not opposed to each other.

”



Krzysztof Charamsa with his partner

“The Catholic Church needs its own Stonewall”

Interview with **Krzysztof Charamsa**, a Polish priest and theologian who worked at the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in Vatican and who came out as gay in October 2015.

Can you tell us what happened after you came out, Krzysztof? What are you doing now, what is your role within the priesthood?

I am free! I am a freelance priest. You know, in Catholic doctrine, you cannot cancel priesthood completely. Once you became a priest, you are a priest for life. But you can be suspended; I am in this situation. Objectively I am a priest – a priest without work, a priest who cannot do his job.

Since I came out, I have been exercising my priesthood in another way; I have had so many contacts with people, with other priests, lay people, young, old. Many LGBTI people wrote to me, who told me their stories, who supported my decision. It's like new work for priest. I think I am even a better priest, but without a job at the Church. Now I am truly a priest, with transparency, in accordance with my sexual orientation. Sexual orientation is an integral part of our personality, you cannot hide it. You cannot work properly without accordance with your sexual orientation. This is the first time I feel such freedom and peace. For me, it's a new experience. Now I am free from shame, from complexes, from hiding yourself, from all those, perhaps schizophrenic, problems. I am free from those false views on homosexuality that are imposed by the Church.

“Yes, I am free, I am happy!”

This is the first moment in my life when I can say “Yes, I am free, I am happy!” It is an exciting experience. I am without work, but I am happy. And it feels little contradictory, because I must think about my future, my pension, my security, because I lost everything. I have no contract any longer. I have been in the church for 18 years. But now it's like all those years of my work did not exist for the church, it's like I am ‘cancelled’.

I just finished my book, which I wrote in Italian and Polish, in two versions, and now I am looking for editors. The book is about my experiences, the experience of a gay person within a homophobic religious institution, in my case – within the Catholic Church. In the Catholic Church, you use every day nice words about love, about compassion, about respect, about tolerance, Gospel, heaven, better life, but in the middle of that there is a very clear homophobic position against sexual minorities. In the Catholic Church, perhaps you can say we have no physical violence, but we have clear physiological violence against sexual minorities. Many call it a symbolic violence or soft violence, and this soft violence has the

same destructive effect on sexual minorities as physical one. So don't kill them physically, but kill them psychologically.

This is my situation now, I have been resurrected.

On a more personal note, how did you make the decision to come out, especially bearing in mind the Church's stance on homosexuality and celibacy? Can you explain the thinking that led you to your decision?

I think it was a process that had been going on my whole life. In the beginning, I was not aware of it. But during the last few years, I had gone through a very conscious process of intellectual studying, comprehension, and confronting modern knowledge about sexual minorities and experiences of homosexual people.

You must know that for most of my life I was convinced that the Church is right in its position against homosexuality. When they say "We don't condemn the homosexual persons, we only condemn the activities", now I know that it's false, it's impossible. But before I believed in this position and in the same time I also knew I was gay. It was situation of contradiction and conflict, it was very complex. When you are in this situation, you are looking for a way to eliminate, to neutralise, to cancel that disturbance, that disorder, that evil. You cannot speak to anybody about this, so you must remain in silence, in solitude and internal terror. When I was young, I had years of such terror.

So the first (and the biggest) part of the process was confronting myself. When I started accepting my sexuality, a new problem arose. In the Catholic Church, you must express your negative judgment about homosexuality, among the clergy, among your friends, with other priests. In my career, I was working in the most important ministry of the Church, the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith. In the beginning, I was fascinated. But then I discovered that it was a homophobic agency. I had the impression that in that office people don't think about God or Christ, but only about gays. Sexuality, particularly homosexuality, was the main topic. It was obsessive.

The second part of my coming out was when I began to study the position of the Church. I began confronting the position of the Church with reality. Here is where the great problem for a priest, particularly a priest in such high position within the Church, began. You must be cynical and false to preserve your position. Or you must lie in accordance to your conscience. In my office, it was like a wall. Every study about homosexuality was immediately labelled as a product of 'gay lobby'. According to them, the 'gay lobby' is fighting against the church and want to impose their position on all people around the world and therefore destroy family, our society.

Homophobia is not something reasonable. If you present 'others' as something negative, people then become afraid of this minority. If you present this minority as a wrong part of humanity, you begin to hate them. When I see manifestations in Paris or in Rome now against marriage equality or civil unions, these protests are promoted and sustained by the Church. And this is exactly the movement of homophobia; it's irrational and emotional reaction of fear and hate against gays.

So this is the falsification, when you define the reality of homosexuality in an incorrect way, then consequently you also construct your position about it in an incorrect way. Homosexuality as a sexual tendency for the Church means that gays want only sex and nothing more, because a gay person is not able to love another person. When I discovered that, it was as if somebody killed me. My community, my Church, tells me that I am not able to love, that my sexuality is wrong. When I began to investigate this church doctrine with my conscience, I started realising I cannot accept it, that my church offends my person and others people like me.

The Church says that gay people must be accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity. You can say that the Catholics should have compassion to all people but it is not the same delicacy and compassion that they must show to heterosexual people. It is the message of superiority – as gay you are ill, you are disordered, but we understand you, poor man! We will treat you with the same compassion as for a mentally ill person. In your disordered state, you must be discriminated against. This is a false Catholic compassion which humiliates the dignity of the homosexual person.

Homophobia, we can say, has Biblical roots, or better – has its background in specific traditional interpretations of the Bible. In the Bible you have nothing against homosexuality, there is no negative judgment about homosexuality, because in the time of the Bible humanity didn't know what we know today. Many other forms of discrimination were justified by Christians with some parts of the Bible: not only the negative perception and the consequent hatred towards gays, but also towards women. As humanity must reject misogyny, racism, anti-Semitism, must eliminate slavery, and many other forms of discrimination and segregations, I think in this moment we must eliminate homophobia. And I think this is a very prophetic and divine time of our history, and I thank God every day that I live in these times that I see the freedoms, the conscience of sexual minorities. As a theologian, I am sad that hope is not coming from the church, not from Christianity. The Catholic Church is way behind others. Evangelical and Anglican Churches have good developments, good reflections and comprehension of the Bible. It's so fascinating when you read the Bible and discover that our traditional interpretation must change because in the light of our knowledge it is false. Today, we understand correctly what is homosexuality and every sexual orientation; back then during the time of the Bible that knowledge did not exist! The Catholic condemnation of homosexuality has nothing to do with God's Word, with God's Gospel! And you know, in the past in our doctrine, we were wrong also regarding many other groups.

I think this is a very prophetic and divine time of our history, and I thank God every day that I live in these times that I see the freedoms, the conscience of sexual minorities

You've mentioned the conflict between the Church's official stance and people within the Church who, according to their conscience, do not agree with its teachings. How can we find a balanced way to eliminate the obstacles between these groups to create dialogue? What needs to happen to instigate change?

Only coming out! Or in another words – the Catholic Church needs its own Stonewall, it needs its own revolution. In the current situation of walls, or closed minds, we can resolve the situation, we can unblock only with a strong call for the Church, to wake the Church up. There are really very many Catholics who do not understand and don't agree with the positions of the Church. But they must start saying it openly. They must begin to openly affirm their disagreement, their rational disagreement with one part of the Church's position. And of course when you disagree with the Church's position on homosexuality, you discover that many positions about sexuality generally in the church are raising many doubts and questions, there are many contradictions, many problems. So I'd say, a little provocatively, that we need to be coming out. Coming out is a personal but also social (and ecclesiastical) liberation. Coming out is something like destroying the imposition of homophobia and imposition of a false image of LGBTIQ people.

Another problem is that many Catholics don't know really what the Church thinks about homosexuality. Now it's little easier, you can find the position on the internet, but many still don't know about the obsessional and paranoid doctrine of the Church on homosexuality. We first of all need to hear from my colleagues, other priests, who do not agree with the Church's homophobia, but hide their opinion, don't say or don't do anything.

For me, it's clear that homosexual people in the Church have a moral (and also a human) obligation to refuse the church teaching about homosexuality. Because that position is irrational. It's against freedom and dignity of gay people. I've said many times that, in the light of modern knowledge, the position of the Catholic Church about homosexuality now is the same as a statement that the Earth is flat and it does not move.

I think to myself: I am gay priest, I do my job very well, I am a professor of two universities, but the church's documents claim that gays have difficulties in professional and social relationships. There are many other false convictions and statements in the Catholic doctrine about homosexuality. But today I think of all the potential we have among the clergy, among lay people in Christianity, in theological world. Today, many people in theology understand that the church position is impossible to defend and is not healthy for homosexual people. Church theory and practice in relation to LGBTIQ people is unhuman.

That means when I say: Islamic State kills gays, but my Church does something similar in a psychological way. The life of gays has to be full of stress, of internal homophobia and of hate for themselves – that is our specialty in the Church! I had it for all my life, so you can understand what does it means for me the last three months without stress! We must destroy fear, horror and terrors of homosexuality in the Church. The revolution of Stonewall, the courage of coming out!

You mentioned hypocrisy regarding other issues, for example the role of women or celibacy. How can people who do not agree with the church on those issues help? What is the linkage between those various issues and challenging homophobia?

You are right – all these problems are connected. And they are connected with a specific patriarchal and masculine vision of the church. All these issues are the result of heteronormativity of the church. And here, gender studies can help us very much. It's a great sin of the church that the church does not want to confront them with gender studies, with reflection about gender identity and sexual orientation. Of course when you are fighting against one form of discrimination, you take on board also other forms of discrimination. Many feminist theologians work for the rights of women, but at the same time they do lot of great work also for LGBTIQ people.

Celibacy is a discipline of the church from 10th century which has nothing to do with God's Word in the Bible. Today we understand also that imposed celibacy is something which is not healthy and can present very negative consequences for priests. And love for God is in no contradiction with love for another human person: woman or man. Celibacy is yet another phase in that patriarchal and masculine government of the church. It is not essential for the priesthood, but it seems essential for the masculine way of maintaining the government in the church.

I think what the church needs today is people who disagree in a strong and visible way, because they defend human dignity. Very often, big libraries, many books and rational arguments don't help as much as when you tell to others who you are and that you are not alone in LGBTIQ community. I think it was a great victory of the LGBTIQ movement; it was a victory of Stonewall. They were martyrs who had the courage to say we are not afraid, we say who we are, we have our dignity and we don't accept segregation! It was the same history of the black movement against segregation, as you think about Rosa Parks or Desmond Tutu. I think we need in the church something like courage of saying no against discrimination presented "in the name of God". My coming out was for me the result of the conviction that this is what I must do and what other brothers and sisters must do in the church to help it.

The first point in my work now with gays, lesbians, trans and intersexual people is to reconstruct their dignity. Now – wake up! You are important, you are good! You must start to know and believe that, to destroy that imposed homophobic vision of yourself. You must trust in your nature. It's extremely difficult for many people. But I have hope, and the hope is humanity. Just look, for example, at Irish vote for marriage equality. The numbers are important in democratic vote, but here the most

Islamic State kills gays, but my Church does something similar in a psychological way

important thing for me was the humanity of people. When people know others belonging to minorities, when they have comprehension of others, when people destroy fear and begin to understand that the 'other' is not enemy of society, you can see how beautiful our humanity is.

How you envisage the future? What is your prophecy for the future in the Catholic Church?

My hope was Pope Francis. But now I am not so hopeful. My image of the future is that we can see is some Anglican or Episcopalian communities: the priest marries but marries in order to his nature, his sexual orientation, married in accordance to his identity. So my photo of coming out with my boyfriend, with my partner, as part of the clergy – this is the image of the future.

Human person was created by God for love, in the image of God and God is love. God is not a woman or a man, God is love and love is the realisation of our humanity

For many people it's impossible to understand that, but I have no doubt that in the Bible you have every space for marriage equality, because a human person was created by God for love, in the image of God and God is love. God is not a woman or a man, God is love and love is the realisation of our humanity. So family, marriage, or every loving relationship – when it's full of love, it is something essentially Christian.

This is very long, difficult process and actually the Church is afraid of this. There is great work ahead in terms of reflection, but it requires a lot of open-

minded people. This must be a process in which we first of all destroy fear, hate and then begin reflection. So we welcome every coming out which destroys our internal walls!

This interview was conducted by **Juris Lavrikovs**, edited by **Emma Cassidy**.

4 myths in the battle for equality

Michaël Vermeulen is a Buddhist inspired philosopher. He studied philosophy, medicine and religious sciences at the University of Leuven (Belgium).

Are LGBTI rights and religious rights mutually exclusive? There are 4 common myths, often shared by all participants in such debates, creating a smoke screen hiding the real issue.

1. It's a battle of 'gay versus god'

The presumed division of society between gays and god-fearing ignores several points.

Firstly, it is quite obvious that not all LGBTI people are atheists. By trying to disqualify the moral reliability of those who advocate equal rights for sexual minorities, the religious anti-LGBTI lobby are also discrediting the faith of religious LGBTI people and of those who support them.

Secondly, it should be noted that the religious anti-LGBTI lobby does not speak for religion as a whole.

By claiming they hold the only just religious point of view, such lobby groups are paradoxically not only opposing

LGBTI-rights but also 'freedom of religion' itself. Religious groups that consider equality for all, including sexual minorities, as part of their religious world-view are equally discredited (or bluntly ignored).

This deceptive attempt to speak on behalf of all religions was picked up by Maria Miller, UK minister for Women and Equality, when she addressed Parliament on the issue of same-sex marriage on 5 February 2013: *"It is important to remember that religious views on same-sex marriage differ too. The Quaker, Unitarian and Liberal Jewish communities; all of those have said they want to conduct same-sex marriages. Paul Parker, speaking for the Quakers, said the first same-sex marriage in a Quaker meeting will be and I quote: 'a wonderful day for marriage and religious freedom'. Our proposals will ensure that all religious organisations can act in accordance with their beliefs."*

In other words: discriminating against sexual minorities is also a violation of religious rights.



**Nassr Eddine Gabriel Errami,
France**

“
Queer muslims used to live on the margins of faith, we are currently driving this avant-gardist tireless march for an inclusive islam. Fighting intersectional discrimination and infrahumanization within faith communities and wider society is a daily challenging struggle. It gives us nevertheless, a very powerful conviction that our rights to live, to love and to celebrate are not subject to any sort of bargaining. We will fearlessly claim full equality, jus soli in those religious and institutional bodies trying to invisibilize us.”

3. All religions claim that sexual variation is not natural

Abrahamic religions will argue repeatedly that sexual minorities behave unnaturally. This is a particularly strange doctrine: from penguins to fruit flies to the family dog... you just need to observe nature to see that it is not true. Sexuality in nature is often more varied than our imagination. So, why do religious leaders keep saying otherwise, even trying to disparage science?

The underlying myth here is that all religions presume the belief in a creator god. This belief in one omnipotent all-good creator has great consequences for our view on morality, because most theologians would argue that all his creatures (and their functions) were created with a specific end purpose. In other words, everything that the almighty creator has made has an inherent goal. According to this view, sexuality is designed by the creator solely for the purpose of procreation. Forms of sexuality that do not fit this

2. Respecting sexual minorities is a recent, secular and 'Western' thing

Those who use this argument might not be aware they are looking at history from a (neo-)colonial point of view. It is often overlooked that the Christian view on marriage and homophobic legislation are two concepts that were exported and globalised by the colonial powers.

In Africa for example, homosexuality has been recorded from the 16th century by the first European missionaries and explorers. The Nzima of Ghana had a tradition of adult men marrying each other, and warriors married boys in Sudan's Zande tribe and paid a bride price for them. Similar reports can be found from all over Africa. It was the Christian missionaries who preached against this and the colonisers who made it illegal. At present, American (often Evangelical) groups lobby hard in African countries to criminalise same-sex relationships under the pretext that they would be 'un-African', but historically, African homophobia is a colonial imposition. (Read more: Stephen O' Murray & Will Roscoe, 2001 – Marc Epprecht, 2008).

Also in Tibet and the Far East, there has always been a greater acceptance of sexual minorities. Heterosexual monogamy has been the predominant marital model in Buddhist cultures, but Buddhism has also tolerated polygamy, polyandry and same-sex-marriages. In China, Confucianism tended not to condemn homosexuality except where it compromised family and social obligations. From the Ming dynasty (1368-1644), to pre-communist China, there are references to officially recognised gay and lesbian relations, even marriages. In Japan, gay and lesbian relationships have traditionally been readily tolerated so long as the partners have had commitment to and sympathy for each other. (Read more: Peter Harvey, 2000)

presumed purpose are not only 'unnatural' but, more important, also immoral. Because the creator is all-good, not following the goals he has set, is an evil act.

There are, however, also religions and world-views that do not accept the dogma of a creator god. And not all Abrahamic theologians will agree with the above. In Buddhism, for example, the cosmos is not a creation with inherent goals, but simply the outcome of timeless action and reaction. As a result, most Buddhists have no

problems accepting Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection. They look at existing variations in behaviour as a fact of life, and will not label them as immoral, just because their existence does not fit a presumed end-purpose.

4. Human Rights are secondary to other considerations

This should be a no-brainer! Human rights are *human* rights. In other words, the only thing you need to be in order to claim these rights is human – that's it.

Human rights protect individuals and minority groups against the power of governments or a factual majority. The majority has the power of rule; minorities are protected by fundamental rights. When dominant social groups try to add extra preconditions to be allowed to invoke such rights, they may still be using the words 'Human Rights', but they are no longer talking about the same thing.

The first attempt to change the meaning of 'human rights' was by the Soviet Union. The famous article 59 of the Soviet constitution obliged citizens to live in line with the standards of socialist society as determined by the Communist Party. The human rights mentioned in earlier articles of the constitution were in other words no inalienable rights to protect individuals from the government, but a reward for good citizenship defined by the Party. Those who did not live accordingly, were legally subjected to terror, as expressed in article 58 of the Soviet Criminal Code. Of course, in doing so, human rights were turned into their opposite.

Similar attempts to undermine the basic purpose of human rights (while maintaining its vocabulary) have been made by religions: the 1990 'Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam' tried to make human rights subject to sharia law. More recently, Christian conservatives have tried to twist the meaning by talking about 'minority homosexual rights taking precedence over the fundamental human rights of the majority'.

However, many religious groups do not share these attempts to make human rights subject to their own world-view. One well known advocate is the Dalai Lama. For the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Right, he wrote: *"We all have common human needs and concerns. We all seek happiness and try to avoid suffering regardless of our race, religion, sex or social status. Discrimination against persons of different race, against women, and against weaker sections of society may be traditional in some regions, but if they are inconsistent with universally recognised human rights, these forms of behaviour should change. The universal principle of equality of all human beings must take precedence."*



Artur, Poland

“

My name is Artur, officially Barbara Kapturkiewicz. I am a Polish Roman Catholic transsexual gay man living in a female body without transition, a physician by profession.

Studying Scripture and practicing my faith, I am fully grateful to God for the gift of being aware of who truly I am in relationship with Him and my fellows. I'm blessed to be in a beautiful relationship, despite the current prejudices and misinformation about gender diversity.

The next step in my own faith journey was to get involved in co-founding "Faith and Rainbow", the group of Polish LGBTQ Christians, as a way to enrich myself and the others like me (people of faith who are reconciling sexual orientation, gender expression and faith in our lives).

Our job is to speak with clergy and lay people about what our life is about and convince them that same-sex relationships are beautiful, worthy, based on love and mutual care - those common love values that should be accepted by the entire society and embraced by our Churches. Our key to liberation is self-acceptance and coming out of the closet, as a personal way to claim and proclaim our voices and experiences as trans people of faith.

”



Mihaela Ajder, Moldova

I have been a human rights activist for ten years now. Prior to starting my human rights work, I was a member of a church. These two go hand-in-hand in my mind and soul, since for me the greatest example of respect for human dignity, equal treatment and radical social inclusion always was the person of Jesus Christ.

What is puzzling though is how different people can perceive differently the same message. My personal passion and professional interest is to provoke reflections and substantive discussions on the same values and see what stands at the core of it, as a way to advance the reconciliation process between sexuality, gender and religion.

An open society

The reason these four myths are common is because, consciously or unconsciously, they hide another motivation: the craving of one group to impose its lifestyle on society as a whole. If all groups would accept they are part of – but distinct from – a diverse society, many of these debates would not happen in the first place. In an open society, all citizens should be free to organise their lives in a non-harmful way. A secular government should strive for full equality and non-discrimination amongst all its citizens, including both religions and sexual minorities.

The battle for equality is about power, not about religion. It's about an open society versus an authoritarian society. It places the movement for LGBTI rights in a long, and indeed Western, tradition of social emancipation of African(-American)s and feminists: *"Not that long ago, it was argued, often on Biblical grounds, that Africans and their descendants were subhuman. It was "natural" for them to be slaves and "unnatural" for them to be in positions of power and responsibility. Similarly, it was argued that women should keep their place in the home, doing the housework and praying for their menfolk. It was also "unnatural" for them to be in positions of power and responsibility."* (Read more: Roger Corless, 2000, p 272)

Battling the anti-LGBTI lobby is not different from battling apartheid. The latter was not a battle between black communities and white communities, rather black and white people united against white racists. In a similar way, the battle for LGBTI-rights is not a battle between sexual minorities against religions, but a battle which unites sexual minorities and religions against religiously motivated homophobia.

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