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Muslims Under the Rainbow: Five Aspects of Reconciling Islamic Faith with Queer Identity

Sabeedah Ravat

University of South Florida, sabeegah@mail.usf.edu

Milton W. Wendland, PhD

University of South Florida, miltonw@usf.edu

Abstract

Academia regarding intersectionality has often involved analyses of how exposure to multiple forms of discrimination impact people's lives. However, researchers have increasingly begun to examine how the compounded negative effects of intersectionality can be mediated to allow a diverse amalgamation of identities to be embraced and empowered. Muslims who identify as sexual minorities represent a unique intersectional positionality, existing in the liminal spaces between communities that many see as distinct and immiscible. Attempting to reconcile the heterogeneous facets of Islam and queerness encompasses navigating various facets of community, family, religiosity, self-identification, and media representation. These journeys are often continuous, involve creating new normalcies and queering methods of embodiment, and, at this time, are more likely to transform individual lives and smaller community spaces than Muslim societies at large. Through an examination of current archival research and lived experiences, this paper will argue that, despite the difficulties of unifying the conflicting Muslim and LGBTQIA+ identities, research strongly suggests that queer Muslims can achieve an uncompromised congruence of faith and sexuality by renegotiating and reinterpreting their relationships with faith, family, community and self.

Keywords

Muslim, Islam, LGBTQIA+, Queer, Sexual Minority, Religion, Family, Congruence, Intersectionality, Queer Studies, Comparative Religion

Peer Review

This work has undergone a double-blind review by a minimum of two faculty members from institutions of higher learning from around the world. The faculty reviewers have expertise in disciplines closely related to those represented by this work. If possible, the work was also reviewed by undergraduates in collaboration with the faculty reviewers.

In 1980, Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term “intersectionality” to describe how different power structures interact in the lives of minorities, resulting in compounded effects of discrimination and oppression (140). Though initially created to illuminate the two-tiered struggles of black women within the overlay of racism and sexism, analyses of the phenomenon of intersectionality have grown exponentially. This is as people seek to dismantle structures that carry multiple burdens for unique communities. For example, people who identify as LGBTQIA+ must contend with homophobia on a daily basis, encountering struggles unique to their sexuality.* Intersecting factors, including race and nationality can further exacerbate the obstacles faced. Those who identify as LGBTQIA+ and Muslim cope with the overlapping consequences of homophobia and Islamophobia. Islam has been historically viewed as strictly anti-LGBTQIA+. Through exploration of the journeys of people who endeavour to reconcile two seemingly mutually exclusive identities, I argue that a congruence of Islamic faith and queerness is achievable.

Homophobia in religion, particularly Islam, is still rampant in the US and beyond. Exploring how queer people conciliate their faiths can help pave the way to more positive representations, inclusivity and security. One of the main issues that arise when finding a way to resolve sexual and gender identities with religion is determining whether there is a space in Islamic theology for LGBTQIA+ people to be autonomous and open about their identities while also being practising, accepted Muslims. “Coming out” (a historically “Western” concept) is also navigated uniquely when queer Muslims decide to share their sexuality with their families or communities. A further obstacle is how reinterpretations of Qur’anic texts can affect the integrity of the belief and connection to the community, particularly whether Islam is ideologically homophobic.

This article examines five key aspects through which queer Muslims can mediate the strain between their faith and their sexualities. First, community response to openly non-heterosexual Muslims can contribute to the strain arising between individuals and their faith-based organisations as well as other resources to which they may turn. Second, coming out to parents and other family members has unique impacts for LGBTQIA+ Muslims and culturally hetero-normative family structures. Third, Islamic theology and its view on homosexuality, namely through scriptural analysis, are not antithetical to one another. A fourth obstacle is the navigation of guilt and the construction of a reconciled self-identity by queer Muslims. Finally, no evaluation would be complete without a consideration of the role of positive representation in contemporary media. Far from an all-encompassing evaluation of the obstacles faced by those seeking to find congruence between religion and sexual identity, this article seeks to participate in the ongoing conversation about a specific intersectional identity. While the role of social and government policing in Muslim-majority states is not scrutinised, the aspects addressed demonstrate how crucial facets in the personal lives of queer Muslims can be renegotiated in order to reconcile the conflict between their faith and sexualities.

Guilt and Self-Identity

Belonging to a religious community can improve mental health outcomes and reduce the risk of psychopathology (di Bartolomeo 1). Similarly, individuals who are an active part of the LGBTQIA+ community are less likely to experience significant mental health issues (di Bartolomeo 8). Those LGBTQIA+ individuals who belong to a religious group do not tend to experience the same positive impacts due to the common homophobic dogma that pervades many major religions, often facing alienation and disenfranchisement (di Bartolomeo 4). The stress of dealing with seemingly unreconcilable identities frequently leads to increased levels of depression and anxiety. In fact, it has

* Expression of non-conforming gender identities is a distinctive experience from expression of non-heterosexual orientations. Therefore, this paper will address sexual orientation exclusively and, as such, the term LGBTQIA+ is used.

been seen that finding resiliency within conflicting identities usually involves weakening one's connection to either of the two communities (di Bartolomeo 34).

In a religion like Islam, which has historically celebrated traditional gender roles, particularly in sexual relationships, it seems as though there is no place for LGBTQIA+ Muslims. When struggling with self-identity, many queer-identifying Muslims worry about how their sexuality might impact the integrity of their religion. In one study, Muslim lesbians explained their fear of "tainting the name of Islam" and how this impacted their decisions to remain closeted, ignore their sexual identity, or to simply detach themselves from their religious communities (Siraj 459). Linked to increased levels of suicidal ideation and suicide, denial or repression of sexual identity can have detrimental impacts on mental health and self-identity development (di Bartolomeo 15).

How LGBTQIA+ Muslims craft and modify their self-identity plays a pivotal role in exacerbating or mediating internalised shame and homophobia. Facing the prospect of a non-heterosexual identity is generally followed by a trifold response: emotional, cognitive, and behavioural (Thomas 131). Queer Muslims harbour feelings of shame and guilt, thoughts of avoidance or "curing" themselves, and actions that include dating members of the opposite sex, or, in extreme cases, suicide attempts (Thomas 132, Kamal 41). A study involving gay Muslim men who live in, or come from, the Middle East disclosed how they labelled themselves by derogatory terms, such as "sodomist," when they initially began to interact with their sexual identities (Thomas 130). Through personal affirmations, however, those terms were often replaced with more encouraging and positive identifications, such as gay, which drastically improved self-confidence (Thomas 133). Processes of self-exploration can help mediate some of the negative feelings queer Muslims direct towards their sexual identities, making them realise that they are not traitors to their religious communities and that they can conciliate their sexuality with their faith.

Coming Out to Family Members

The obstacle of coming out to one's family can be one of the most difficult and painful experiences, especially if the individual has been raised in a highly religious or largely conservative household (though these two are not necessarily conjoined). According to a 2003 survey, most parents respond with some degree of negativity to the coming out of a child, including reactions of disbelief, sadness, or denial (Savin-Williams and Ream). Traditional views on a nuclear family and conservative political stances, frequently accompanying rigid religious beliefs, are often associated with negative responses to the coming out of a family member (Fournier Rodriguez 6).

Already faced with the burden of one stigmatised identity, many parents who belong to ethnic or racial minority communities, such as Muslim families, react negatively to the coming out of a child. This causes concern for the wellbeing of their children who will inevitably have to contend with overlapping discrimination relating to different facets of their identities (Willoughby *et al.* 81). The decision to come out to family members involves having to find a balance between living sincerely and remaining safe, as LGBTQIA+ people must consider potential responses of violence and ostracization. When a family reacts positively and works to assimilate a non-heterosexual member's sexuality into their whole identity, they can help provide a buffer and protection against external heterosexism (Fournier Rodriguez 3). If the opposite occurs, however, a queer person may find themselves without a home and without a family and rebuilding these immensely pivotal cornerstones can sometimes seem impossible.

In a recent series that highlighted experiences within the LGBTQIA+ community, *Chosen Family*, YouTube star Tyler Oakley interviewed queer youth who had been pushed into homelessness after coming out to their parents. He spoke to Shadi, a gay Muslim man from Syria who was forced to seek asylum in the US after his father discovered his sexuality and reacted violently, using a hot

metal rod to brand his skin. Not only was his home life made unsafe and unstable, but due to the collectivist nature of Middle Eastern society, Shadi was unable to find refuge anywhere else in his community. Despite growing up Muslim, the trauma of his coming out had made Shadi reluctant to return to Islam until he met his fiancé, after which he began a journey of re-exploring his faith. Family response is an integral component of fracturing or solidifying a queer Muslim's religious connection.

Being accepted by family members is only one aspect of the coming-out process and families often have to face the “negotiation or renegotiation of family connections” (Fournier Rodriguez 2). A family's expectations of a “nuclear family” are challenged by the non-heterosexuality of a child, and families have to reform their notions of marriage, offspring, and the makeup of a family (Willoughby *et al.* 76). For example, *Queer Eye* fashion expert Tan France explained that, while his family did not reject his identity, they decided to avoid the topic entirely and did not attend his wedding (Van Ness). Furthermore, while a Muslim family may be accepting of a non-heterosexual member theoretically, they are likely to have difficulty understanding how the assimilation of religion is possible, such as expressing concern for the fate of the family member in the afterlife (Basria). This indicates the range of “negative” responses and the various obstacles that can manifest. Therefore, it is often crucial for LGBTQIA+ Muslims to “disentangle” their religious beliefs from the normative expectations of their family members (Kugle 98). Queer Muslims who maintain or rebuild family connections, or those who face the tumultuous task of constructing a new chosen family, are more likely to remain connected to their Islamic faith or re-establish that connection in concert with their gender identity (Kamal). This means that coming out to parents may redefine both the role of familial bonds in cultivating religion as well as the very essence of what or who counts as family.

Community Response

Regardless of personal relationships to religion, most queer people of faith find their public religiosity strained once they come out (Sollenberger 2). Many feel forced to choose between two seemingly incompatible identities, while others to seek out alternative religious or non-traditional spiritual denominations. Additionally, many queer people of faith consider religious community support integral to unifying conflicting elements of their identity (Dahl and Galliher 107). A 2007 PEW survey revealed that seventy-three percent of American Muslims disapproved of homosexuality; this percentage decreased drastically to forty-eight percent by 2017 (Alnagar 5). Another study determined that older Muslims believe that Muslim youth are “corrupted” by Western ideas of sexual fluidity and that this leads to a disconnect from Islam (Bonthuys and Erlank 269). While some queer Muslims confess to being ashamed of their sexualities, others feel betrayed by their communities, especially if they have been members of their Islamic groups for extended periods of time before coming out (Jones 158, Kamal 40). Feeling rejected by Islam, queer Muslim frequently forfeit their membership to that community in which they feel they no longer have a place. For some, cultivating a sense of belonging within an accepting community can be the difference between life and death. Although there are multiple LGBTQIA+ accepting churches, much fewer resources exist for queer Muslims who are looking for spaces in which to reconcile their religious and sexual identities. LGBTQIA+ Muslims sometimes seek belonging in other communities that appeal to their racial or ethnic identities, such as South Asian Queers, or within other queer faith organizations (di Bartolomeo 35).

It can be complicated to find a space where it is safe to embrace both queerness and Muslim identity, with many feeling isolated and alone (Kugle 106). For some people, like University of South Florida student Kashif Basria, this ambiguous space between contested identities can actually prove generative. In a recent interview, Basria reflected “I feel that being somewhat of an outlier to both communities serves as an advantage because I'm able to become a subject of a conversation that is long overdue between the two groups.” The number of organisations that accommodate the spiritual

and religious needs of queer Muslims is increasing, with multiple groups across the US serving LGBTQIA+ identifying Muslims. For example, the Muslims Alliance for Sexual and Gender Diversity is a nationwide effort that cooperates with others of its kind around the world, like The Inner Circle in South Africa, Salaam Canada, and the UK's Safra Project. Such communities reject fundamentalist interpretations of Islam and seek to contextualise Qur'anic meaning in the present zeitgeist (Kamal 10). Perhaps more importantly, progressive organizations tackle the myth of "being the only one" who identifies as both queer and Muslim by openly engaging in community building to raise awareness. These spaces and the continually increasing exposure allows members, as well as those who are still finding resources, to explore various facets of their identities in accepting environments with the hope of establishing reconciliation between their religion and their sexuality.

Religious Reinterpretation

With regards to religious principles on sexual relations, Islam has understood largely as sex-positive. Islamic texts emphasise the importance of sex to increase intimacy and strengthen relationships, as well as noting the centrality of female pleasure (Thomas 37, Kugle 184–85). This remains contained, however, within the boundary of heterosexual marriage. Paradoxically, contemporary Muslim communities still perpetuate the idea of Islam as sexually repressive by viewing sex and sexuality as taboo (Thomas 37, Kugle 185). Traditionally sex is rarely discussed by US Muslims, whether in public or in the privacy of the home, and sexual education in the home is basically non-existent.

In recent years, multiple Islamic scholars from the West (Doi) have taken up the task of analysing and reinterpreting scriptures of the Qur'an and oral Hadith (teachings believed to be passed down from Prophet Muhammed PBUH) that have been perceived to promote heteronormativity and traditional gender roles. Central in this movement is Scott Kugle, a gay Muslim Islamic theorist who uses post-modernist approaches to dismantle some of the stereotypes about Islam's frigid view of homosexuality. A major goal of his work involves examining the ways in which the Qur'an, which Kugle deems a "primary and essential source" of Islam, holds space for same-sex relationships and only condemns violent or coercive same-sex acts (27). Likewise, he considers how Hadith reports and *Fiqh* (legal rulings) have hindered potential reconciliations of sexuality with religiosity, as well as possible ways of challenging these limitations. Kugle asserts that he has specifically chosen not to rely on singular translations but has reconciled various Qur'anic translations with his understandings of Arabic texts. As his work is crucial to the argument of this section and the field broadly, the translations from his book I use here.

Through citing his chief source of analysis as Qur'anic scripture, Kugle simultaneously addresses the difficulty of authenticating secondary sources, such as Hadith. Kugle mentions that, though some Hadith are considered verified, none have been undeniably substantiated (83). Furthermore, he urges readers to recognise the recurring contradictions that arise from different Hadith that are cited. Other leaders in progressive Islamic communities, such as South African Imam (Muslim religious leader) Muhsin Hendricks, also remain cautious about wholeheartedly embracing all Hadith as factual and true. Hendricks mentions that he often finds "Hadith contradicting the Qur'an" and, thus, is intentionally selective about which Hadith he incorporates into his own faith and his teachings (498). These nuanced examinations reject a monolithic acceptance of Islam, providing platforms from which cultural teachings can be dismantled and religious clarity can be found.

One foundational Qur'anic verse alludes to the endorsement of ubiquitous acceptance and social tolerance of the natural diversity of humankind. In wider contexts, however, progressive Muslims believe that the verse has greater potential beyond its literal translation and can form the basis of liberation theology in terms of condemning sexism, homophobia, and gender injustice (Kugle

22, 108). This verse has been drawn upon in multiple Muslim activist endeavours to oppose discrimination, such as racism and classism:

O people, we created you all from a male and female
And made you into different communities and different tribes
So that you should come to know one another
Acknowledging that the most noble among you
Is the one most aware of God. (Qur'an 49:13)

In acknowledging the divinity implied by the words “we created,” it can be understood that sexual diversity is as much a God-willed occurrence as racial and geographic diversity in Islam. Kugle maintains, however, that diversity as a primary purpose of creation remains “underdeveloped in Islamic theology” (29). As such, this one singularly poignant verse can provide queer Muslims with a relatively open space upon which to begin the process of reinterpreting their belonging in Islam.

The ambiguous nature of many Arabic words in Qur'anic scripture have both the potential for many interpretations as well as narrowed to limit diverse interpretations. For example, the word *shahwa* literally translates as “lust” or “sensual desire,” utilized in the Qur'an with both positive and negative connotations (Kugle 146). The term is widely used to describe engaging in human pleasures, including eating and sex. Most translations superficially consider *shahwa* to be rooted in indulgence and, hence, inherently immoral (146). Kugle challenges this assumption by noting that *shahwa* is not always “bad,” and should the preference have been to address ego-driven desire and lack of self-control, *bagha* is a more specific Qur'anic word (527, 147). He also notes the androgynous nature of the word *zawj* or “partner,” a grammatically masculine noun that is used to refer to female-identifying people. This is further reflected by the feminine word *nafs* that refers to a person's “soul,” even if the person is a male. In exploring the plastic nature of Qur'anic language, Kugle finds that scripture does not delimit to heterosexual relationships, and its frameworks urging partnership can include same-sex couples.

Antigay elucidations that remain pervasive in Islamic, Christian, and Judaic religious text commonly draw from the same historic narrative, that of the Prophet Lot and the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah.:

You lust after men rather than women!
You transgress all bounds! (Qur'an 7:10)

Must you, unlike [other] people, lust after males and
abandon the wives that God has created for you? (Qur'an 26:165-166)

Though the cities are not explicitly named in the Qur'an, Kugle addresses how this verse led to the creation of a novel legal term, *limat*, by jurist interpreters (150). This word, which roughly corresponds to “sodomy” in English, is not directly present in the Qur'an in the context of Lot's people or otherwise, something that Kugle believes led to a cementing of homophobic readings of the narrative in Islamic teaching (111). Similarly, the word “sodomy” was also introduced by English churchmen, indicating how singular interpretations have been historically weaponized to stigmatise same-sex relationships and maintain homophobic prejudice in institutional religion (Greenberg 64).

Liberation theologians and LGBTQIA+ Muslim activists have rejected this interpretation largely due to its reductive nature. In fact, the story of Prophet Lot includes a number of condemned acts including rape, gambling, and rejecting the message of God's Messengers. Analyses of earlier references to Prophet Lot in the Qur'an refer to his tribe, including women and children, being destroyed, indicating that male-male sex acts were likely not the only or primary punished offences (Kugle 156). Kugle categorically states that homosexuality “was marginal to the essence of the story and its moral lesson” (157). Furthermore, Jewish literature has largely come to understand the story

of Lot as a warning against inhospitality and perversion of justice (Greenberg 65). As such, Kugle and many other scholars have challenged this supposed scriptural prohibition of homosexuality and reinterpreted it as a condemnation of the abuse of guests and of rape.

The story of Lot has been widely studied across multiple religions and is now often understood to be a narrative of Prophets being rejected by their people and to warn against the use of sexual assault and emasculation as weapons (Greenberg 64, Nkosi and Masson 75). Patriarchal and homophobic prejudice has been instrumental in the misinterpretation, and subsequent weaponization, of this story as a condemnation of homosexuality. Kugle concludes that

One can argue that the story of Lot is not about homosexuality at all. Rather, Lot criticizes using sex as a weapon. Lot condemns sex acts that are coercive, like rape. This is a critique of male sexuality driven by aggression and the urge to subjugate others by force, not of male homosexuality in particular. It is incidental to the story that his guests, who are the targets, are male. (166)

In failing to address the divine punishment of the entire tribe, as well as the fact that the rapists had wives and children, narrow censure of homosexuality as the moral lesson is deficient at best and dangerously inaccurate at worst.

Of course, Islam is not simply a following of the Qur'an as a training manual. Queer-positive imams have stressed the re-emergence of *ijtihad* (independent reasoning), which was once prominent in the Islamic faith and would allow all Muslims to critically evaluate Islam rather than blindly accept the words of others (Hendricks 498). *Ijtihad* as a practice builds consciousness and allows for more nuanced interactions with both Qur'anic scripture and Hadith; Kugle goes so far as to suggest that *ijtihad* is an act of resistance that challenges power hierarchies and promotes understandings of faith in oppressed and excluded groups (28, 129). For LGBTQIA+ Muslims in particular, *ijtihad* offers a tool by which they can appraise their religion in relation to other aspects of their identity.

Determining a congruence between Islamic and LGBTQIA+ identities is no small feat and involves a substantial amount of self-exploration and external research. As Kugle eloquently states, “the religion can itself become liberating” if the Qur'an and its subsequent interpretations are not taken at face-value and instead carefully investigated (39). Islam can and does hold space for LGBTQIA+ Muslims, particularly if progressive theology and protection of vulnerable sub-communities from injustice is recentralised. Furthermore, personal understanding of religious texts is largely central to integrating these conflicting identities of faith and sexuality (Dahl and Galliher 107). Hence, reconciliation of religiosity and sexuality is not only possible but important and achievable. Through congruence, queer Muslims can be granted support of a religious community, as well as the sanctity of consciousness-based faith, without having to sacrifice other defining aspects of themselves.

Positive Representation

Positive representation in the media is a powerful force to help validate minority sexual identities and in promote dialogue and acceptance. Traditional media, particularly television, has often portrayed LGBTQIA+ communities in ways that perpetuate stereotypes, focus disproportionately on victimization or tokenisation, and predominantly depict “palatable” white gay men (McInroy and Craig 40). As media evolves, however, more diverse communities have found spaces to create and seek genuine representation. For example, social media and blog sites, such as Tumblr, give underrepresented youth the opportunity to craft their own narratives and, thereby, open the door to more wide-reaching prospects. The architect of the *Just Me and Allah: A Queer Muslim Photo Project*, Samra Habib, produced a gallery with attached self-related experiences of LGBTQIA+ Muslims around the world and subsequently published her memoir *We Have Always Been Here* in 2019. Dylan

Marron, a popular media personality and social justice advocate, created a miniseries in celebration of the overlap of Pride Month and Ramadan in 2017, entitled *Extreme(by Queer) Muslims*, in which he interviewed queer Muslims, shedding light on the intersections of their identities and dismantling stereotypes that prove oppressive in compounded ways.

Big-budget streaming production companies are increasingly conscious of this representation as well. In 2018, Netflix rebooted the makeover series *Queer Eye*, with several changes including casting the gay Muslim Pakistani-British Tan France as their fashion expert. France has been candid about navigating his family, community, and global spaces as a brown, gay, Muslim man and that, coupled with the ubiquitous success of *Queer Eye*—including an Emmy win—has allowed his story to influence increased representation of LGBTQIA+ Muslim people of colour. Likewise, in 2017, *Freeform* introduced the first lesbian Muslim character on cable TV, Adena El-Amin, on their original series, *The Bold Type*. El-Amin wears a Hijab, the traditional Muslim headscarf, speaks Farsi, and faces instances of Islamophobia, xenophobia, and homophobia. Her intersectionality has made her a popular character and helped launch a public discussion on what it means to identify as an LGBTQIA+ Muslim in the US.

For queer Muslims, positive and engaging representation can provide a buffer for negative personal experiences and foster a stronger sense of self-worth (Craig *et al.* 256). Seeing an identity being celebrated either on-screen or in real life can allow queer Muslims to begin dismantling internalized homophobia, develop stronger security in their identities, and imagine a successful and joyful future that does not involve having to compromise any facet of who they are. On a macro scale, affirming portrayals can contribute to larger cultural conversations and changes in the treatment of marginalized communities (Craig *et al.* 258). More extensive and dynamic representations of happy and successful queer Muslims can lead isolated youth to believe in their ability to unify their faith with their sexual orientation and gender identity.

Conclusion

While Islam and queerness may seem like immiscible concepts, reconciling these two identities is attainable via a range of outlets and relationships. The journey to conciliate cultural, religious, communal, and familial self-identity is unique for every LGBTQIA+ Muslim, but usually incorporates coming to terms with oneself in the context of the sociocultural environment within which one exists. This can involve key notions, such as how queer Muslims are treated in Islamic communities, familial response to coming out, reinterpreting their religious notions, labelling their sexuality, and the nuances of representation to which they are exposed. Inevitably, establishing congruence between the disparate facets of an LGBTQIA+ Muslim identity requires negotiation of connections to people and communities, and is likely to be an ongoing endeavour as people move through the world.

Conciliatory journeys are often continuous, involving new normalcies and queering methods of embodiment. At this time, assertions in this article and others like it are more likely to transform individual lives and smaller community spaces than Muslim societies at large. Larger societal and governmental paradigm shifts still remain hopeful at best, but personal identity unification can save lives and build communities. Such communities can be instrumental in instigating more widespread progress. Ultimately, research continues to confirm that queer Muslims are capable of leading successful, satisfying lives, without having to compromise their beliefs or their sexual orientation.

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