

SLIPPING THROUGH THE CRACKS: LESBIANISM IN ISLAM AND CHRISTIANITY

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GSWS 189: Sexuality in World Religion
November 28, 2023

1. Introduction

Despite what the modern-day Bible-thumper may claim, LGBTQ people have existed in every time and civilization and have lived extraordinary lives throughout the millennia. Religious traditions of all types have been integral to the very fabric of many of these societies, so LGBTQ individuals have necessarily been intertwined with every faith: as practitioners, as leaders, and even as the divine. However, it is all too common a notion today that the twenty-first century west is the first society to include gay people. Rejection of this supposition has led to a campaign of scholars, activists, clergy, and the curious average Joe uncovering tales of queer people existing, resisting, and thriving in times and places where no one thought possible. Such personalities have been found in and out of religious traditions; they have been found in scriptures, myths, and governments alike. Even in this frenzy of revealing and reworking queer history, the newly lauded stories highlight more men than women, more the male gay than the lesbian. This trend follows from other disciplines including history, science, the arts, and religion: the continual ignorance and overlooking of women, especially queer women. In an environment already keen to ignore the queer voice, the female queer voice, dually marginalized, was ever more buried.

One might argue that this invisibility, however inadvertently, gave queer women some liberty to live their truths where they may otherwise not have been able to. In the premodern era, as religious authorities cracked down on homosexuality and cemented homophobia into the traditions, the focus was, per usual, on the men. Much literature on homosexuality in religion examined male homosexual orientations and activities while not paying the same amount of attention to the female, as was typical of any subject at the time. So, by virtue of patriarchal ignorance of women if nothing else, was female homosexuality accepted in the early days of the

traditions? This essay will explore such a question in regards to Islam and Christianity. Although similar examinations could be made about any other religious tradition, Islam and Christianity have been selected specifically in an attempt to understand them deeply rather than all the traditions broadly, and this line of questioning in regards to Hinduism, Judaism, etc constitutes a potential avenue of further study.

2. Examining Lesbianism in Islam

A first peek into the possibility that early Islam accepted female homosexuality can be found in the story of Lot in the Qur'an. This story is perhaps the one most often referenced by religious authorities in regards to homosexuality, both to condemn it, and, in light of recent scholarship, accept it. In the story, God sends two angels down to Lot's tribe to observe their poor behavior and decide if the village is worth saving. Once there, Lot welcomes them into his home, but a mob surrounds the house, insisting that the angels emerge so that they can "know" them, commonly understood as the desire to homosexually rape them. Seeing the mob's rejection of God's messengers and its attempt to violently prove their superiority over them confirms God's belief that the town is truly wicked and undeserving of salvation, leading God to destroy it. Many believers have interpreted this destruction as a clear sign of God's wrath toward homosexuality, and some Muslim authorities "read into the scriptural text the conclusion that Lot was sent primarily to forbid anal sex between men."¹ Here lies the major basis for the condemnation of homosexuality in Islam. Recently, though, modern Islamic scholars have reinterpreted the story of Lot to reflect a greater acceptance for homosexuality than the classic

¹ Scott Siraj al-Haq Kugle, *Homosexuality in Islam: Critical Reflection on Gay, Lesbian and Transgender Muslims*, (Oxford: OneWorld Press, 2010), 50.

perspective. Scott Kugle, one of the earliest and most influential voices for this reinterpretation, argues that the mob's threats of rape were focused more on maintaining superiority than on experiencing homosexual sex: "It appears that the men of Lot's tribe were actually heterosexual men attempting to aggressively assert their power against other vulnerable men."² Rape is a crime of power rather than a crime of passion, and mob craved power over their community and over God's messengers, so whatever hate God feels here is directed towards the rejection of his messengers and his prophet in Lot, as well as towards the violence and inhospitality of the tribe, rather than towards homosexual orientations and behaviors.

Despite intense focus on the Lot story in recent decades as clashes between Islam and the gay rights movement have intensified, "the story of Lot does not address sexual acts between women."³ Thus, little can be ascertained about the best Muslim attitude towards lesbians from this pivotal story. Even if one subscribes to the traditional, homosexuality-decrying interpretation of the Lot story, can such a condemnation apply to lesbians if the focus is male anal rape? Perhaps not. When looking at this one story alone, a reader could find an acceptance for female homosexuality which cannot be found for the male by the simple fact of its omission. Regardless, one story out of the whole Qur'an and all the hadiths cannot constitute the creation of a full attitude towards female homosexuality in Islam. While this loophole created by the general invisibility in the male-centered social order of the time offers possible grounds for the previously unacknowledged acceptance of lesbianism in Islam, other texts where such actions and orientations are alluded to must also be examined.

² Kugle, *Homosexuality in Islam*, 54.

³ Kugle, 64.

Perhaps the most revealing of these verses that “clearly and unambiguously address same-sex acts between women” refers to women who “commit the immorality (al-fahisha),” nudging the scholar down a confusing path of conflicting translations.⁴ Those who believe the “immorality” refers to female homosexual acts note that the requirement of four eyewitnesses to confirm such immorality is the same as the requirement to confirm sex outside of a heterosexual marriage contract, despite the fact that the punishment here “is not similar at all to that for fornication (lashing) or adultery (stoning).”⁵ This supposition is further debunked grammatically, in both English and Arabic. The use of the Arabic *hunna*, a pronoun specifically referring to a group of three or more women, as opposed to *huma* for two, and the English translation “your women” all point to this immorality, if it is actually sexual in nature, taking place between a group of women. One struggles to pinpoint a type of intercourse that is executed by three or more women.⁶ As such, a verse that may originally have been read as a direct condemnation of lesbianism in Islam is actually not so direct, and demonstrates a place where queer women can find acceptance and a space for themselves within the tradition. The Qur’anic context of this verse further bolsters such an argument: the verses directly preceding and proceeding these two discuss “honesty in dividing inheritance to support orphans and the vulnerable,” thus making it more likely that “the verses allegedly forbidding lesbian sex actually address financial honesty and fraud.”⁷ The verses being about lesbian sex would be a nonsensical discontinuity from the flow of the Qur’an’s storyline. Additionally, in true patriarchal fashion, male jurists often “suppress issues of economic injustice and social justice in favor of more narrowly defining

⁴ Kugle, 64.

⁵ Kugle, 64.

⁶ Kugle, 64.

⁷ Kugle, 65.

ethics in terms of sexual morality”: instead of producing interpretations that would increase moral, godly behavior in people of all genders, they clamp down on women’s sexual autonomy. Seeing past this patriarchal interpretation reveals not only a place for queer women but a learning opportunity for all Muslims.

It also stands to reason that lesbian orientations and actions are not illicit in Islam, but that the circumstances in which they occur are. This would suggest an important yet previously overlooked acceptance within the tradition and could found a new precedent for the full legitimization of LGBTQ Muslims. A wide range of sexual acts are above board in Islam, so long as they take place within a legitimate marriage. Despite the fact that “a licit same-sex marriage is a categorical impossibility” because the foundations of a Muslim marriage necessitate that the partners are heterosexual, were such a category to exist then one would find not only an approval of homosexual sex acts but of homosexual orientations as well.⁸ If a relationship is legitimized through marriage, then the connection between the partners must be approved of before the actualization of the marriage, which would suggest that lesbian relationships are fine in and of themselves, but cannot be made fully lawful because there is no way for them to marry and seal the deal. Rather than a resistance to the connection between the partners, “it is the lack of a lawful tie between [them] that renders the act illicit.”⁹

Further, the legality of any sexual act is of utmost importance, but, as is all too common in male-centered legal systems, the law does not fully address women and their potential for same-sex activities. Throughout all Islamic literature, “most discussion of homoerotic acts

⁸ Kecia Ali, *Sexual Ethics in Islam: Feminist Reflections on Qur’an, Hadith, and Jurisprudence* (n.p.: Oneworld Publications, 2006), 78.

⁹ Ali, *Sexual Ethics in Islam*, 77.

focuses on male/male sexual activity.”¹⁰ While such invisibility and lack of a presence in legal frameworks is not ideal for lesbian liberation in the long run, in the early days of the tradition it may have allowed lesbian Muslims to fly more under the radar and fulfill homosexual relationships. Conversely, their male counterparts may not have had this same degree of flexibility. In the context of a male-dominated culture, a large reason for such a silence may be that “many legal effects of sex depend on penetration by a penis.”¹¹ If Islam does not consider sex between women actual sex, then lesbians could theoretically bypass needing a legal marriage in order to have it. Through this circumvention of marriage, lesbian relationships exist outside every notion of “normative” in Islam, and create a space for themselves where there was not one previously. This entirely separate space could provide an interesting jumping-off point for a queer and/or lesbian Muslim theology, though such an exploration is beyond the scope of this paper.

3. Examining Lesbianism In Christianity

What is perhaps the most glaring example of lesbianism in Christianity is not a niche, predicated tidbit pulled carefully from the finest details of scripture. Instead of the condemnation one might expect, the Bible celebrates the story of Ruth and Naomi, elevating the couple’s importance by “giving them their own book in Scripture.”¹² It does not get more central and exalted than a book in the Bible. Additionally, Ruth’s tender words of devotion for Naomi, “where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people,” have

¹⁰ Ali, 80.

¹¹ Ali, 80.

¹² Jay Michaelson, *God Vs. Gay?: The Religious Case for Equality*, (n.p.: Beacon Press, 2012), 95.

been used in Christian weddings for centuries.¹³ The two have all the makings of a committed lesbian couple, having “made vows, loved each other deeply, adopted each other’s extended families as their own, and relied on each other for substance,” and their story has everyday relevance to Christians even today (through the adoption of the couple’s wedding vows into many modern ceremonies).¹⁴ While the case of Ruth and Naomi imbues the Christian tradition with important lesbian representation, one cannot argue that this is a place where lesbianism is condoned but male homosexuality is not. The gay male finds his own representation in the story of David and Jonathan, another same-sex Biblical couple that loved each other “in an intense emotional way that is far more than mere platonic love or friendship.”¹⁵ Nevertheless, Ruth and Naomi represent an explicit exaltation of lesbianism in the Bible.

Another key Biblical text that works to the advantage of lesbians is, ironically, the verse most often cited as a condemnation of homosexuality. Leviticus 18:22 only ever discusses male homosexuality in its direction to not lie with man as with women. Clearly, the gendered language here indicates that males are the recipients of this command, and Leviticus never clarifies for women to not lie with women the way they would with men. Not to mention that it would be difficult for the type of lying that two women would partake in to be the same as the type of lying undertaken by a man and a woman. “Biblical and Jewish law regard this ‘lying’ as requiring penetration by a penis,” so, just as in Islam, if lesbian sex does not even qualify as sex because it lacks a penis then Leviticus 18:22, inadvertently if by no other means, permits lesbianism where it does not permit male homosexuality.¹⁶ This analysis, of course, overlooks recent

¹³ Ruth 1:1-16 (New Revised Standard Version).

¹⁴ Michaelson, *God Vs. Gay?*, 95.

¹⁵ Michaelson, 100.

¹⁶ Michaelson, 61.

reinterpretations of the Leviticus 18:22 clobber passage that suggest that it does not even condemn male homosexuality, so in this sense lesbianism is doubly affirmed: once within the traditional mode of thought, and again by the reinterpretation. Further, for a major chunk of early Christianity (up until the 1100s), lesbianism was merely “immodest, perhaps lewd—never a violation of Biblical law.”¹⁷ Even if Leviticus did forbid male homosexuality, no such restrictions applied to women. Again in the Christian tradition, one finds situations where lesbians, in being overlooked for their status as women (rather than for their status as queer or as queer women) by the patriarchal societies in which they lived were excluded from scripture and religious law, and thereby had a bit more freedom to live truthfully and to maintain same-sex relationships than did their male counterparts.

However, Paul’s letters to the Romans are an aspect of scripture where lesbians do not fly under the radar as they do elsewhere in Christianity. While some authorities argue that Romans 1:26 refers to bestiality or sex during menstruation, it appears to more plausibly discuss female homosexual sex, especially since Romans 1:27 goes on to “introduce[s] sexual relations between males with the term ‘in the same way,’ thereby specifying that the females’ unnatural intercourse was of the same type as that of the males.”¹⁸ Romans 1:26-27 even goes so far as to suggest that homosexual women are “deserving of death as God’s punishment” and “classif[ies] homoerotic men and women into two relatively parallel groups.”¹⁹ While certain biblical hermeneutics can be applied to these verses to understand them as not denouncing of homosexuality, the fact remains

¹⁷ Michaelson, 60.

¹⁸ Bernadette J. Brooten, “The Bible and Love Between Women,” *Open Hands* Volume, 15:3 (Winter 2000): 15.

<https://www.brandeis.edu/projects/fse/christianity/docs/christianity/chris-essays/chris-ess-broote n.pdf>.

¹⁹ Bernadette J. Brooten, *Love Between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 303.

that these hermeneutics would serve to liberate both lesbians and gay men, thereby demonstrating how Romans 1:26-27 is not a passage that subliminally accepts lesbianism.

In Romans, Paul also addresses female homosexuality specifically with his allusion to Roman women exchanging “natural intercourse for unnatural,” being the first members of the group to experience God’s punishment for idol worship.²⁰ This specific succession and differentiation between women and men in relation to homosexuality here shows how lesbianism was the explicit target of religious examination in Romans. Additionally, other Christian writers of the early centuries of the common era besides Paul “vigorously condemn sexual relations between women.”²¹ John Chrysostom, a 5th century scholar, even goes so far as to claim that “female homoeroticism is ‘far more disgraceful’ than male homoeroticism ‘since they ought to feel more shame than men.’”²² Clearly, this assertion is heavily steeped in patriarchal ideology and can be reinterpreted by queer hermeneutics, but Chrysostom specifically addressing female homosexuality demonstrates that the topic was of at least some cultural relevance and received attention from scholars. In other words, while in some places in Christianity lesbians could operate more freely than gay men, Romans is not one of them, and that trend of invisibility is not present all across the board.

4. Conclusion

Although one must do a bit of digging in order to find them, places certainly exist within both Christianity and Islam where lesbians are afforded a bit more freedom in their sexualities and relationships than homosexual men. Most of these spaces are created by the mere exclusion

²⁰ Brooten, “The Bible and Love Between Women,” 15.

²¹ Brooten, 16.

²² Brooten, 16-17.

of women in religious legal frameworks and/or by sole focus on men, such as in the definition of sex. However, there are a few overt instances of lesbian love, such as the story of Ruth and Naomi in the Bible and medieval Islamic literature that is “unusually littered with references to female homosexuality.”²³ While invisibility of any marginalized identity is ultimately harmful and counterproductive to the full actualization of that group, in very early Christianity and Islam, when LGBTQ rights and sometimes even existences were so repressed, invisibility was a virtue rather than a detriment to lesbians. This overlooked acceptance is somewhat scattered and is not always uniform: there are very few references (and even fewer concrete ones) to female homosexuality specifically in both the Bible and the Qur’an, and while a lot of these offer potential acceptance of lesbians, some, such as the verses Romans 1:26-27 in the Bible, appear to condemn it specifically. Understanding and utilizing these gaps where they do exist, in combination with other strategies of textual interpretation from lesbian and queer theology, provides a solid foundation for faith that unites female sexuality and tradition.

²³ Samar Habib, *Female Homosexuality in the Middle East* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 65, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203941454>.

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