

# Homoeroticism and homosexuality in Islam: a review article

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From the medieval confrontation between the Muslim world and Christendom to the present day, the moral and social institutions of the respective ‘other’ have been the subject of close cross-cultural attention. In particular, questions related to sexual morality, including the issue of homosexuality, were, and still are, used as a polemical focus for mutual denigration.

In the eyes of medieval Western writers, Islam’s allegedly tolerant and even encouraging attitude towards sexual practices between people of the same sex was yet another indication of Islamic self-indulgence (Daniel, 1993: 164ff.). With the secularization of Western civilization and the emergence of a liberal attitude towards sex in modern times, moral issues have lost much of their relevance in Western polemical discourse against Islam. At the same time, the liberal sexual morality of the modern Western world is in turn perceived by Muslim societies as an indication of the growing decadence of the West and so serves Islamist propagandists as welcome proof of Islam’s moral superiority. Among other things, the heightened visibility of Western homosexuals, together with the increasing decriminalization of homosexuality, epitomizes for many Muslims the decay of Western culture. Moreover, as contemporary Western gays often, wrongly, assume Islam to be more well disposed to gay culture than the Christian-Judaeo tradition, homosexual sex-tourism to Muslim countries and the considerable number of gay converts to Islam have played a significant role in making modern Western sexuality visible in the Islamic world (Duran, 1993: 186). One result, especially in the more conservative Islamic states, has been a growing tendency to repress homosexual practices (Sofer, 1992: 131–49). Any attempt to form a movement for gay rights in the Islamic world is seen as yet another symptom of ‘Westernization’.

Medieval Christian prejudices and polemics against the supposedly wide prevalence of homosexuality in Islam, and the Islamists’ polemical reaction to modern Western homosexuality are both based on the different attitudes of their respective cultures to sexuality in general and homosexual practices in particular.

The Quran explicitly condemns homosexual acts without, however, indicating a specific punishment. Whereas some traditions of the Prophet display tolerance of homoerotic desires, others report the Prophet to have said that both the active and the passive partner must be killed. The jurists differed in their opinions as to the severity of the punishment, ranging from flagellation to death by stoning. However, as in the case of adultery, proof is difficult to establish (Pellat, 1986: 776–7; Duran, 1993: 181–4). With variations over space and time, the legal provisions remained to a large extent theoretical, and the frequency of homosexual practices in the Islamic world is well attested by a variety of sources, such as prose romances, poetry, *adab* literature, dreambooks, and legal and medical literature. Moreover, Islamic law condemned homosexual practice, not homoerotic sentiment. Mutual attraction between males was unanimously viewed to be perfectly natural and normal. Islamic civilization being essentially phallocratic, the role of the penetrator in the sexual act is considered dominant and superior. His social respectability remains untouched by his sexual practice, regardless of the nature or gender of the object of penetration. Homosexuality between an adult male and a pubescent boy seems

to have been widely practised in Islamic societies. As long as the penetrated was a boy who was not yet virile, his masculinity was not regarded as compromised by his taking the passive role. In contrast to other cultures (e.g. Melanesia), however, age-structured homosexuality was apparently never regarded as a sexual initiation promoting or accomplishing the masculinization of boys. Being sodomized by an older male was sometimes even perceived as bringing disgrace upon the boy's family. Passive homosexuality in adults (*ubna*) was considered pathological (Rosenthal, 1978: *passim*). For an adult male, it was an unspeakable disgrace to act as a passive partner (*ma'būn*).

In contrast, the Judaeo-Christian tradition not only condemned homosexual practices but also considered individuals with proclivities towards members of their own sex to be abnormal and perverted, without making any distinction between the penetrator and the penetrated. Unlike the Islamic tradition, it also repudiated sexual pleasure of all kinds as detrimental to salvation and spirituality. The strict differentiation between 'normal' persons engaging exclusively in heterosexual relations and 'abnormal' persons engaging in bi-sexual or exclusively same-sex practices gradually evolved into the modern Western connotation of homosexuality as a conscious subculture composed of individuals whose self-identification proceeds largely from an exclusive sexual orientation. Moreover, whereas turn of the century homosexuality was still patterned by gender (third-gendered), modern Western homosexuality since the Second World War has been predominantly egalitarian: both partners define themselves as gay regardless of who penetrates whom.

The investigation of homosexual practices in Islamic civilization has until recently been a closed subject of enquiry. Seeing the history of homosexuality as a marginal field, if not an embarrassing and distasteful subject of study, Western scholars of Islam and the Middle East have either ignored it altogether, treated it in occasional footnotes or, at worst, misrepresented and judged it on the basis of their personal moral convictions. Scarcely any attempt was made to go beyond observing overt homosexual behaviour to analyse the social and cultural forms of such homosexual activities, whether they were patterned by age, gender or class, how they functioned or affected individuals and society at large, and what might be the causes of the various forms of homosexual practice. Even among gay historians, the study of the homosexual practices of the Middle East was long neglected. Among the first publications in this field was Bruce W. Dunne's outline of an agenda for historical research on homosexuality in the Middle East (Dunne, 1990). It was followed by *Sexuality and eroticism among males in Moslem societies*, a collection edited by Arno Schmitt and Jehodea Sofer (1992), consisting primarily of personal accounts by Western travellers of their disappointing sexual encounters with Arabs and Iranians. In his subsequent *Bio-bibliography of male-male sexuality and eroticism in Muslim societies* (1995), Arno Schmitt provided a wealth of references to Islamic and Western primary and secondary sources dealing with homosexuality and homoeroticism in Islamic civilizations. In recent years, interest in homosexuality in Muslim cultures and societies has increased greatly among both gay historians and students of Islamic civilization in general. Among the results of this research now available in print are the books reviewed here: Stephen O. Murray and Will Roscoe: *Islamic homosexualities: culture, history, and literature, with additional contributions by Eric Allyn et al.* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1997) and J. W. Wright Jr. and Everett K. Rowson (ed.): *Homoeroticism in classical Arabic literature* (New York: New York University Press, 1997).

The editors of *Islamic homosexualities* define the purpose of the collection

first, as offering ‘historical, anthropological, and literary studies and texts documenting the conceptions and organizations of homosexual desires and conduct in Islamic societies’ (p. 4). Second, the editors challenge the ‘social constructionist’ model within the scholarly debate on the constructs of gender and sexuality. According to that view, sexual categories and identities are not abstract, universal and applicable to all societies. Rather, they are historically specific and socially created. Thus the form, content, category and significance of sexuality and sexual activity differ according to cultures and historical periods and are associated with changing social, economic and political structures. Accordingly, contemporary Western homosexuality represents a unique pattern of identity, life-style and group formation.

Against this claim, the editors argue that the patterns of homosexuality to be found in Islamic societies are not categorically distinct from all aspects of modern homosexual identity and life-style. The uniqueness of modern Western homosexuality is in fact limited to the egalitarian aspect of modern gay identity which became predominant in the Western world only after the Second World War. The earlier pattern of the modern turn of the century homosexual was still based on gender (third-gendered)—a pattern also recurrent in Islamic societies. By contrast, other characteristics allegedly unique to modern Western homosexuals, such as the adoption of non-heterosexual identities based on homosexual practices, the creation of homosexual networks, and the formation of groups and subcultures, are well attested in various times and places in the Islamic world. With this criticism the editors place themselves in the ‘essentialist’ camp of this scholarly controversy. The essentialists maintain that sexual phenomena such as heterosexuality, homosexuality and bi-sexuality are generic to all individuals in all places and times and determine social constructs rather than being determined by them. The editors also criticize the various social-constructionist explanations of why modern homosexuality developed in the Western world, e.g. the development of modern medicine, the rise of capitalism, or the emergence of major urban centres, as insufficient, and point out that many of these were also features of Islamic societies.

The collection begins with a group of introductory articles on homosexual phenomena in Islamic cultures. Stephen O. Murray (‘The will not to know: Islamic accommodations of male homosexuality’) shows how the apparent tolerance of homosexual practices in Islamic societies depends on a widespread and enduring pattern of collective denial in which a condition of the pursuit of homosexual activity, whether based on age difference or gender definition, is that the behaviour should never be publicly acknowledged. Even so, he demonstrates that homosexual roles, both age- and gender-defined homosexual roles, were lexicalized in the various pre-modern and modern Islamic languages. Murray (‘Women-woman love in Islamic societies’) also reviews the few and scattered references to woman-woman sexual relations in Islamic societies and shows that the widespread assumptions of harems as hotbeds of tribadism are based almost exclusively on male (both Western and Muslim) assumptions and fantasies rather than on reliable evidence or direct observations. Will Roscoe (‘Precursors of Islamic male homosexualities’) surveys the age or status-differentiated and gender-structured forms of homosexuality in pre-Islamic times from the Mediterranean to South Asia, and how and to what extent these patterns were transmitted to Islamic societies. He concludes that, in sharp contrast to Christianity where all forms of homosexuality were suppressed since late antiquity, Islam tolerated many of these patterns, and they therefore survived unchanged over centuries. Jim Wafers’s article, ‘Muhammad and male homosexuality’, a revised version of a chapter of his MA thesis (‘Sacred

and profane love in Islam: dimensions of gay religious history’, Indiana University, 1986), sets out to formulate a theological accommodation of homosexuality within Islam. For this purpose he first reviews the reference to same-sex practices in the Quran and Sunna and then puts forward an interesting, albeit far-fetched argument for a homology between submission to the will of Allah and the sexual submission of young males to other males.

Homoerotic phenomena in Islamic literatures are the subject of part 2 of the book, ‘Literary studies’. This includes three chapters which examine medieval Persian, Arabic and Turkish writings, seeking to disentangle the corporeal from the ethereal in their extensive invocations of and discourses on love. Wafers’s article, ‘Vision and passion: the symbolism of male love in Islamic mystical literature’, again taken from his MA thesis, investigates the vision complex in mystical erotic, same-sex symbolism: i.e. gazing at a beloved person; and the passion complex, i.e. the lover wounded or killed by his beloved. Murray (‘Corporealizing medieval Persian and Turkish troops’) considers passages of Persian and Turkish poetry, and Louis Crampton (‘Male love and Islamic law in Arab Spain’) draws on various sources to investigate Hispano-Arabic attitudes to homosexuality. He examines Ibn Hazm’s treatment of homosexuality in his treatise on love, *Ṭawq al-ḥamāma*, draws attention to some homosexual love affairs involving rulers, and considers homoeroticism in Hispano-Arabic poetry.

With one exception, the articles of Part 3, ‘Historical studies’, are by Murray. He discusses the military élites of medieval Egypt and Syria and the Ottoman empire, and the forms and implications of age- and status-stratified homosexuality in one-generational élite systems (‘Male homosexuality, inheritance rules, and the status of women in medieval Egypt: the case of the mamlūks’ ‘Homosexuality among slave elites in Ottoman Turkey’). He also reviews nineteenth-century reports of Islamic homosexual practices in general (‘Some nineteenth-century reports of Islamic homosexualities’) and at the court of Ali Pasha (1741–1822), the Ottoman vizier of Albania, in particular (‘Male homosexuality in Ottoman Albania’). Mildred Dickman (‘The Balkan sworn virgin: a cross-gendered female role’) discusses reports of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Muslim and Christian women from Albania, Macedonia and southern Serbia who resisted marriage and adopted a male gender identity.

Part 4, ‘Anthropological studies’, consists of articles based on contemporary and direct experience by Pakistani and European ethnographers. The articles of Sigrid Westphal-Hellbusch (‘Institutionalized gender-crossing in southern Iraq’), Murray (‘The *Sohari Khanith*: male actresses in Islamic parts of Indonesia and the southern Philippines’), Nauman Naqvi and Hasan Mujtaba (‘Two Baluchi buggas, a Sindhi zenana, and the status of Hijras in contemporary Pakistan’) and Naqvi (‘The other side of midnight: Pakistani male prostitutes’), describe gender-crossing roles (male and female) in Iraq, Oman, Pakistan, Indonesia and the southern Philippines. Badruddin Khan (‘Not-so-gay life in Pakistan in the 1980s and 1990s’), and Murray and Eric Allyn (‘Two Islamic AIDS education organizations’), document the present situation of gays in Pakistan and Malaysia.

The interdisciplinary nature of the articles and the diversity of their approaches, judgements and evaluations, reveal the complexity and multiplicity of homosexual practices and patterns in medieval and modern Islamic cultures. This breadth of coverage is definitely one of the volume’s main strengths. One of its major shortcomings results from the fact that, with few exceptions, the contributors are trained sociologists, anthropologists or historians with no philological or linguistic background. The majority of the articles are

exclusively based on secondary literature or translations of source materials. The weakness is especially deplorable in the articles of parts 1 and 2.

*Homoeroticism in classical Arabic literature*, by contrast, consists exclusively of contributions by experts on classical Arabic literature. Moreover, the volume does not address issues relevant to scholars of gay history such as homosexual practices and patterns in Islamic societies, homophobia, or the question of to what extent patterns of Islamic homosexuality resemble or differ from modern Western conceptions of homosexuality. The book's concern is instead with analysing homoerotic symbolism, such as male motifs, masculine allusions and phallic symbols, in classical Arabic (and Persian) lyric poetry, anecdotal collections, mystical narratives, courtly letters, political satires, shadow plays, vernacular songs and dreambooks dating from the eighth to the fourteenth centuries, using a wide range of methodological approaches. It shows clearly that the pervasive homoerotic motifs in classical Arabic literature, often employed as metaphors, parody or satire, convey meanings that reach well beyond the superficial and polemical misreadings of early Western writers, who simply interpreted them as evidence of the sexual culture of Muslim societies. It thereby both confirms the pervasiveness of homoerotic symbolism in Arabic literature and demonstrates its complexity.

Establishing a close relationship between the text of the Quran and poetry, Suzanne Pinckney Stetkevych ('Intoxication and immortality: wine and associated imagery in al-Ma'arri's *Garden*') argues that just as the Quran can only be understood through the imagery of pre-Islamic poetic imagery, Arabic poetic imagery can only be fully understood with reference to the Quran. Analysing Abū 'l-'Alā' al-Ma'arri's description of the delights of the Garden in his *Risālat al-Ghufrān*, in which he freely mixes paraphrase and quotation from the Quran with quotations from poetry, Stetkevych shows that poetic and quranic imagery both employ a standard group of *topoi* associated with wine (i.e. other liquids such as honey, milk, etc., the slave-girl songstress or musician, the cupbearer (*sāqī*), spices or perfumes and pearls) which spring from a single archetype and are of always apparent *topoi*. While these *topoi* symbolize immortality and salvation in heavenly contexts, they are illicit and damning when not referred to as the delights of heaven. Whereas the homoerotic aspect of the *sāqī* is not operative in the quranic text, it emerges, explicitly or implicitly, outside it. Using a similar approach to Stetkevych's, J. W. Wright Jr. ('Masculine allusion and the structure of satire in early 'Abbāsīd poetry') reviews homoerotic imagery in early Abbāsīd wine poetry, *khamriyya* and *mujūn* literature. He illustrates the way that Arabic poets used the illicit symbolism contained in sacred texts (e.g. wine drinking, admiring heavenly-looking ephebes, or the metaphorical subjugation of heroes and religious leaders) and exploited the inherent textual tensions that resulted in order to create parodies and satires of the prevailing political structure and social order. Paul Sprachman ('Le beau garçon sans merci: the homoerotic tale in Arabic and Persian') investigates various versions of the basic homoerotic tale in which a man, typically a Muslim, becomes infatuated with a boy, typically a Christian, in Arabic literature of the tenth and eleventh centuries and its adaptations in later Persian texts. He shows that one of the ties that bind together the various Arabic and Persian versions of the tale is the demonization of temptation.

Looking at Greek, Byzantine and Arab treatises on the interpretation and analysis of dreams as recorded by the Christian Greek Aḥmad b. Sīrīm, Steven M. Oberhelman ('Hierarchies of gender, ideology, and power in ancient and medieval Greek and Arabic dream literature') examines the social signification

of sexual activity in the three cultures. He concludes that the sexual codes of ancient Greece, which defined a person's sexuality and his position in the social hierarchy in terms of domination by or reception of the penis in the sexual act, remained essentially unchanged by Byzantine Greece and medieval Islam.

Franz Rosenthal's ('Male and female: described and compared') is a meticulous survey of the literary genre of comparative debate (*Rangstreit*) on the relative qualities of girls and beardless boys from the third/ninth to the sixth/twelfth centuries, and gives an exposition of epigrammatic descriptions of boys and girls in verse in the ninth/fifteenth century. He shows that feelings and emotions have no place in these genres and that they served first and foremost as exercises in technical skill and literary artistry. Everett K. Rowson ('Two homoerotic narratives from Mamlūk literature: al-Şafadī's *Law'at al-shākī* and Ibn Dāniyāl's *al-Mutayyam*') analyses two works of narrative fiction from the early Mamluk period, each relating a homosexual love affair. Al-Şafadī's (d. 764/1363) epistle *Law'at al-shākī wa-dam'at al-bākī* embodies the chaste, romantic tradition. It presents the range of idealized aspects of love with all physical, moral, and even logical constraints suspended. Ibn Dāniyāl's (d. 710/1310) fictional shadow-play, *al-Mutayyam wa'l-dā'ī al-yutayyim*, by contrast, provides the most apposite *mujūn* correlate to al-Şafadī's epistle. From the evidence of these two texts Rowson concludes that, although they presuppose a society in which male erotic attraction to males is assumed to be natural, that society nevertheless imposes constraints on homosexual eroticism which encourage its treatment in terms of either sublimated frustration (al-Şafadī) or antinomian indulgence (Ibn Dāniyāl).

James T. Monroe ('The striptease that was blamed on Abū Bakr's naughty son: was father being shamed, or was the poet having fun?') presents an edition, translation and analysis of the Andalusian poet Ibn Quzmān's (d. 556/1160) *zajal* no. 133. As a pseudo-panegyric it not only satirizes a member of the ruling class but ultimately aims at disrupting the entire social order. Richard Serrano ('Al-Sharīf al-Ṭalīq, Jacques Lacan, and the politics of abbreviation') applies Lacan's psychoanalytical approach to an investigation of the Andalusian poet al-Sharīf al-Ṭalīq's (d. 400/1009) uses of homoeroticism in his poetry in an attempt to uncover the motive force of its imagery.

Both volumes reviewed here, despite, or rather because of their different perspectives and methodological approaches, break new ground in the study of one of the least understood aspects of Islamic civilizations, the treatment of which in Western scholarship up till now has either been marginal or largely a reflection of the unquestioned presuppositions and moral attitudes of the writers concerned. Together, these volumes represent a major contribution to our knowledge and understanding of homosexual practices and homoerotic symbolism in Muslim societies and literatures and provide a firm foundation for serious, gender- and culture-conscious research on homoeroticism and homosexuality in Islamic civilizations in the future.

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