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Islam, homophobia and education: a reply to Michael Merry

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Focusing on the disagreements between Muslims and homosexuals over sexuality education, this article highlights the need in liberal societies for respectful dialogue between groups that hold diametrically opposed beliefs and values. The article argues that it should be possible for Muslims to set out a religious perspective that is critical of homosexual behaviour without being accused of homophobia, just as it is possible for homosexuals to criticise Islamic teaching about sexual behaviour without being accused of Islamophobia. It further argues that any attempt to force Muslims to accept Western attitudes towards sexuality might run the risk of becoming a new form of cultural domination. Genuine respect (which is a major goal of moral education) requires a willingness to listen to others and to accept people for what they are.

I am very grateful to Michael Merry (2005) for his detailed critique of my writing on Islamic attitudes to homosexuality.¹ He has analysed many of the key issues with great clarity, and has provided a coherent framework to a disparate set of articles written over nearly twenty years. He pays appropriate attention to underlying values and principles, as well as providing specific and sometimes hard-hitting criticisms of what I call (for the sake of brevity) the ‘Muslim perspective’ on homosexuality.² There are many points on which he and I agree, particularly the values of tolerance, justice, fairness and mutual respect, but inevitably in this brief reply I shall focus mainly on areas of continuing disagreement. I shall begin with issues of principle, particularly relating to the place of non-liberal minorities in a liberal democratic society, and then respond in turn to Merry’s three main criticisms of my writings.

Merry recognizes that my interest in discussing the disagreement between homosexuals and Muslims over sexuality education is at least partly its symbolic value, in that the debate illustrates in a very stark form the difficulties a liberal multicultural society faces in attempting to deal justly with minority groups that hold diametrically opposed views. Setting aside the complexities of the debate for the time being, we can identify, on one side, a ‘homosexual perspective’ which sees homosexuality as morally acceptable and as part of the legitimate diversity of liberal

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societies, and on the other, a 'Muslim perspective', which maintains that homosexuality contravenes divine law and is a denial of God's creative purposes, and that state schools should therefore not teach that homosexuality is morally acceptable (for to do so would be to side with a contestable conception of the good). The original article which inspired the present discussion (Halstead & Lewicka, 1998) suggested that one consequence of the increasing acceptance of homosexual lifestyles in the liberal West has been the marginalisation or rejection of the 'Muslim perspective'. The article attempted to articulate a possible Muslim response to this trend, and suggested that there may be both prudential and principled arguments for the liberal state to adopt a neutral approach in teaching about homosexuality, offering equal respect and recognition to both perspectives. Merry's reply is based on the belief that the 'Muslim perspective' is a homophobic one, and that homophobia, like racism, has no place in a liberal society. He argues that if Muslims are to achieve respect as citizens of liberal societies, they must move towards acceptance of liberal values, including recognition of homosexual lifestyles, as indeed (Merry claims) many are already doing.

Merry is not alone in maintaining that if Muslims seek recognition in liberal societies, they must be willing to change some of their beliefs and values.³ In particular, they are often told that they must abandon an unquestioning epistemological reliance on the sacred text, they must respect and even facilitate the exit of young Muslims from the community of believers, and they must encourage children (in Macedo's words) to 'acquire a measure of distance on all claims to truth' (2000, p. 238). But from the perspective of Muslims and other non-liberals, this view appears intolerant of their most cherished beliefs, and therefore culturally oppressive. I set out the opposing view that if groups with differing views are to co-exist in harmony in a liberal society, they must develop mutual respect, and this requires dialogue without preconditions. However, dialogue is not easy for people who speak different languages and profess different worldviews. There is a need for cultural interpretation, so that the beliefs of Muslims, for example, can be expressed in language comprehensible to homosexuals and vice versa. In the series of articles which Michael Merry discusses above, I have attempted to perform the role of cultural interpreter, drawing on forty years of knowledge of the Muslim world, in order to attempt to express Islamic teaching and values fully and fairly and as far as possible without distortion, in a language that is as accessible as possible to non-Muslims.⁴ Like all interpreters, I have attempted to set my own views aside,⁵ at least in this part of my work. So to call it an 'odd defence of an Islamic understanding of homosexuality' misses the point: it's not a 'defence' so much as an attempt to facilitate dialogue. Whether it is 'odd' remains to be seen.

To respond to Merry's first main criticism, the question at issue is not really whether Islam as a world faith is less hostile to homosexuality than I suggest. The question is whether Muslims who *do* hold the views I expound deserve a respectful hearing in the liberal marketplace of ideas. I have no argument with Merry's claim that Islam is a broad mosque and unites people with different cultural practices and traditions. It would be futile to deny that there are some Sufi poets who write about

their relationship with God using metaphors in which the figure of the Beloved is male rather than female;⁶ or that there are some Muslims who accept Western notions of sexual orientation (especially among those who have had sustained exposure to Western modes of thought), and some who define themselves as gay (especially in America);⁷ or that there are some Muslims who attempt a more liberal (or higher critical) interpretation of the Qur'an.⁸ But the fact is that there are also very many Muslims who continue to adhere to orthodox Islamic teaching about homosexuality, based on the Qur'an, the hadith, Islamic law, and the teaching of Muslim theologians over many centuries, and that this is the belief expressed in every Muslim book on sex education that I have read. Merry's arrogant dismissal of orthodox Islamic teaching as a 'questionable' and 'static' understanding of Islam does nothing to promote inter-group understanding. If real dialogue is to take place between homosexuals and Muslims, there has to be a willingness for each party to listen to and engage with the actual beliefs and worldviews of the other, however unpalatable these may be at first sight. Unfortunately, Merry does not demonstrate this. He takes for granted as true contemporary Western constructs of sexual orientation and pays no attention to the claim (which I represented in my article as a Muslim claim, though of course it has much wider currency) that there is no such thing as a homosexual orientation, only homosexual practices. Yet such a claim has profound implications for the moral understanding of homosexuality.⁹ His unwillingness to listen or even to consider the possibility of an alternative perspective on homosexuality does not sit easily with his demand for respect for minorities.

The second major claim that Merry makes, and the one for which he reserves his most strident language, is that there is a 'militant bigotry towards homosexuals' embedded in core Islamic values. Linked to this, he accuses me of claiming that Islamic homophobia 'deserves our respect', and he highlights in particular the 'oppression of gay and lesbian Muslims' that results from this 'bigotry'. In order to assess the validity of these claims, let us first try to agree on what is meant by 'homophobia': we may find, as Colwell (1999) suggests, that not everything called 'homophobic' these days actually merits the nomenclature. Perhaps drawing a parallel between Islamophobia and homophobia will help. 'Islamophobia' means bullying, discrimination, abuse and social avoidance directed at Muslims because of unjustified fear or hatred of them, and in the same way 'homophobia' can be defined as bullying, discrimination, abuse and social avoidance directed against homosexuals because of unjustified fear or hatred of them. If this definition is accepted, then it is clear that there is a difference between expressing disapproval of homosexual behaviour and being homophobic. Just as Catholics have the right to say that according to Catholic teaching abortion is wrong, so Muslims (and others) have the right to say that according to Muslim (and other religious) teaching homosexual practices are wrong—without being accused of homophobia. Criticism of certain practices is not incompatible with respecting the personhood of the perpetrators of those practices. To suggest that all disapproval of homosexual activity is by definition homophobic looks like special pleading. But in any case disapproval is not incompatible with tolerance; indeed, if we define tolerance as 'a deliberate choice

not to interfere with conduct of which one disapproves' (cf. Horton, 1993, p. 3), this implies that disapproval is a necessary precondition for tolerance.

But perhaps what Merry means when he talks of 'crass prejudices and hatred' is not that Islam itself is homophobic, but that Muslims typically are. This is an empirical claim, for which he offers no evidence, and certainly none to suggest that Muslims are more homophobic than non-Muslims. Contemporary Muslim writers on sex and sex education take pains to point out that the bullying or persecution of homosexuals is, like all bullying, unacceptable. For example, D'Oyen says that 'Muslims should not attack homosexuals' (1996, p. 87) and Sarwar condemns 'seeking out those with homosexual desires with a view to persecuting them' (1996, p. 24). This does not sound like the intimidation of homosexual minorities of which Merry accuses Muslims. On the contrary, it expresses considered opposition to violence, bullying and persecution directed towards homosexuals. So Merry's statement at the end of his article that encounters between Muslims and homosexuals in the common school 'have even led to instances of Muslim students joining others in denouncing psychological or physical violence towards homosexuals' is both patronising and offensive to Muslims. It implies that tolerance, understanding, and respect for human dignity and personal integrity are exclusively liberal virtues, and that it is surprising when they are shown by Muslims.¹⁰

With regard to the 'stigmatisation and fear' experienced by homosexual Muslims within the Muslim community, it is again necessary to consider this in the context of broader Islamic beliefs and practices. Islam does not hold individual freedom to be such a central value as liberalism does. It is a tradition in Islam that if one Muslim sees another going astray, he has a moral responsibility to encourage him to get back on the right path. From this point of view, it is easier for Muslims to be accepting of practices that conflict with Islamic teaching if these are the practices of other groups within a multicultural society than it is to tolerate them within the Muslim community itself. So a pattern which seems to be emerging among Muslim communities in multicultural contexts (cf. Sarwar, 1996, p. 24) is that there is very widespread tolerance of diverse practices and lifestyles, including homosexual ones, outside the Muslim community (so long as these practices are not liable to 'corrupt' Muslim youth and are not otherwise against the public interest), and a policy of non-interference so long as the practices or lifestyles conflicting with Islamic teaching are engaged in privately by those within the Muslim community (on the basis that the responsibility for judging such actions ultimately belongs to God). What is less acceptable is the public display, within the community, of behaviour which is in conflict with Islamic teaching, for public acceptance of such behaviour would undermine the very basis of the Muslim community. Even in this case, however, bullying, discrimination, abuse and social avoidance would not be considered an appropriate response.

Merry's third major criticism is reserved for my suggestion that Muslims (like all other groups in society) need to be taught *about* homosexuality. For him, such an approach to teaching is too limiting, too cold and objective, too lacking in empathy. I did not intend it to be so. In distinguishing 'teaching something' from 'teaching

about something' I had in mind the distinction between teaching honesty and teaching about honesty. We teach honesty because we want children to be honest, but we teach about Islam, or about the ancient Greeks, or about homosexuality, because we want children to be educated, to know what the world is like in its diversity and to know what the world looks like to a Muslim or an ancient Greek or a homosexual. Empathy is central to the process, as well as critical reflection. This applies equally to common schools and to what Merry calls comprehensive Muslim schools, because both have a duty to prepare children for life in a multicultural society. Indeed, there is evidence that Muslim schools are increasingly seeing it as their role to prepare children for full citizenship by forming alliances with common schools (Sasano, 2003). But of course the relationship must involve openness and a willingness to listen on both sides. If Muslim children are to learn about Western concepts of sexual identity as well as respect for those who identify as homosexual, then presumably other children need to learn about Muslim perspectives and to respect them. Merry shows little interest in this. In fact, though he calls for something more than an enlightened live-and-let-live approach, his response to my article illustrates precisely the difficulty of achieving this.

Merry and I hold much in common, particularly in terms of the need for respect and understanding between groups. Ultimately, however, he seems to want to change Muslims, whereas I want to find some way of accommodating them in a way that does not require them to go against their own deeply held beliefs. He wants to reinterpret texts, to force Western terms of reference on Muslims, to encourage Muslims to adjust their beliefs and 'catch up' with the progressive thinking of some Christians and Jews—and all of these things indicate a claim to moral superiority; some might even call them cultural imperialism. Genuine respect requires understanding, humility and empathy, as well as a willingness to listen and to accept people for what they are.

Notes

1. In this reply, as in previous articles, I am restricting my attention almost exclusively to male homosexuality.
2. The term 'Muslim perspective' should not be taken here to imply either that all Muslims share this view, or that no non-Muslims do.
3. See, for example, Cohen (2004).
4. Indeed, my original purpose was to render Western homosexual views more comprehensible to orthodox Muslim believers as well as to interpret Muslim beliefs for Western homosexuals. The article was first offered to an Islamic publisher, but was turned down as too liberal. This illustrates that difficulties may be encountered on both sides when one tries to encourage dialogue between Muslims and homosexuals.
5. Of course it would be naïve to claim complete objectivity because one's own prejudices may be reflected subconsciously in a whole range of decisions that have to be made in the course of interpretation.
6. I have warned elsewhere of the dangers in reading too much into this. Similarly, there are many references to intoxication in Sufi poetry, but this does not imply moral or religious approval of the consumption of alcohol.

7. For example, in an article entitled 'Sexuality, diversity and ethics in the agenda of progressive Muslims', Kugle calls for a more 'sexuality-sensitive interpretation' of the Qur'an (Kugle, 2003, p. 203).
8. See the range of articles reprinted in Ibn Warraq (2002), although since this author also wrote a volume entitled *Why I am not a Muslim*, this may not be a very good example.
9. In the Muslim world, homosexuals tend to be defined by their behaviour either as 'men' (the penetrator) or 'non-men' (the penetrated), whereas in the West it is the matter of 'orientation' that is important and actual sexual behaviour is a private matter. The 'men' (whose behaviour is sinful but not unnatural) may themselves be sexually aggressive, but the 'non-men' (*shudhudh* in Arabic, meaning unnatural or queer) may sometimes be victims rather than voluntary participants in sinful behaviour. The fact that there are more 'men' than 'non-men' leaves boys and other weak and vulnerable persons (including Western gays with a different view of homosexuality) open to abuse. Women (biological women) are protected in Islam by all kinds of regulations and social customs, but 'non-men' have no such protection—they only have the prohibition of homosexual acts to protect them.
10. Sometimes liberal tolerance exists more in rhetoric than in reality. For example, one may compare the willingness of British Muslims to sit down in dialogue with members of the Unification Church at a recent conference organised by the Islamic Academy, Cambridge, with the unwillingness of the 'liberal' British Home Secretary to allow an entry visa to the Rev Sun Moon.

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