

## Islam and same-sex relationships

by Jeremy Seabrook

Same-sex relationships do not regard religious, cultural or legal taboos and prohibitions. They exist in all societies, at all times. The tolerance extended to such relationships varies, but the most stringent constraints of the law and the most permissive of societies probably have less influence than is generally believed upon actually existing humanity and its needs. Much depends on public perception and declaration.

Whether or not Western versions of identity politics represent the most truly liberating conditions for the realisation of alternative sexualities is, despite the celebration of diversity, nevertheless questionable. The categories of Lesbian and gay/bisexual/straight often strike people from other cultures as odd, even incomprehensible. They will point to the fluidity and absence of definition in same-sex relationships in other cultures, which accommodate different *behaviours*, rather than *identities*.

The idea that homoerotic, emotional or sexual relationships between men (and access by male foreigners to Islamic society makes it easier for a man to refer to male-male relationships than to those between women) are un-Islamic, have no place in Islamic culture and are inimical to divine teachings, is disingenuous. After all, Christianity was until recently scarcely a great friend of homosexuality; and the tolerance extended to alternative sexual orientation is very new indeed. The McCarthyite purge of homosexuals in the 1950s USA was no momentary aberration. It has been argued that Western tolerance is not even what it claims to be, but is, rather, the indifference of an extreme individualistic society, where people, profoundly preoccupied with their own personal lives, have no time to cast a censorious eye on the behaviour of others.

It is a question of how such relationships are structured and psychologically integrated into the culture in which they exist. The discovery of fundamental identities in sexuality in The West is the product of a specific moment in one particular culture. It does not represent universality, or even necessarily, the emancipation claimed for it, since even in Western societies, other interdictions are set up in place of the dissolution of sexual taboos. It is always dangerous to assume that the official version of any society represents the whole culture, and it would be as mistaken to read into the Western celebration of diversity an absence of prejudice, violence and even queer-bashing, as it would to read into the proscriptions upon homosexuality – or even draconian punishments for it - in Saudi Arabia the complete elimination of any such relationships. The testimony of the sexual abuse of young Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Indian men who work in the Gulf scarcely suggests that same-sex relationships are unknown. We are well aware of the discrepancy between theory and practice in our own culture; yet we are not able to see its mirror image in societies from which we recoil.

In Islam, sexual relationships are bound by the duties of family and kinship, which are all embracing. However, the observance of conjugal and paternal duties is one thing. Friendships, affective, erotic, possibly sexual, behaviour outside the hallowed precincts of the joint, extended or nuclear family are not,

on the whole, subject to scrutiny, once the contractual duties to family have been observed.

Human relationships do not follow religious or ideological prescriptions, no matter what penalties are imposed upon departures from moral orthodoxy – whether the severity of Soviet Russia, where it was believed that sexual ‘deviancy’ was a relic of capitalist barbarism, or the legacy of the Raj in Section 377 of the Indian penal code, or indeed, the merciless punishments carried out against gay men in Iran or Saudi Arabia. In April 2000, nine men involved in cross-dressing and ‘homosexual acts’ in Saudi Arabia were sentenced to 2,600 lashes and up to six years in prison. The floggings were to be delivered at 15-day intervals, 48 – 52 lashes at a time. In a much-publicised case in Cairo in 2001, 52 Egyptian men were arrested on a boat on the Nile and charged with debauchery and contempt of religion. Twenty-three were sentenced to terms of jail between one and five years. The prosecutor told the court ‘Egypt will not be used for the defamation of manhood and will not be a hub for gay communities.’ To understand the more general way in which same-sex relationships function in such societies is, of course, makes such judgements appear all the more humane and unjustifiable.

The point about many such cases is that they are perceived as inspired by, and imitative of, a Western idea of ‘gay’. The Western inflection given to such relationships is the source of anger. Dr. Abd Al-Hadi Misbah, a lecturer at Egypt’s Al-Azhar University faculty of medicine, sates ‘We, as men of medicine and religion, must base our defence of religion on science, because the West tries to destroy religion and justify such acts with science.’ An article in Al-Akhbar in February 2002 was titled ‘The West’s Defence of These Perverts Causes Nausea and Repulsion in Egyptians.’

Generally, however, in Muslim, Hindu and other cultures, how people behave is detached from labels given by others to that behaviour. Individuals express their feelings of attraction, affection or desire according to the context.

The western obsession with a self-consciousness that cannot forbear to reflect upon what it is doing and why, and how it should name and present itself to the world, is an alien sensibility to many other cultures. That this represents the fullest liberation of human beings animates the contemporary consciousness of superiority of the West, and it is, in many ways, simply a reformulation of earlier ideologies of dominance. It is unthinkable that the paradigm which has evolved in the richest and most powerful societies in the world should not be exported - even to places where it strikes with great violence against other ways of being, other methods of dealing with the complexities of the most delicate human relationships and bonding. It is absolutely characteristic that this should be the object of messianic zeal, no less intense than other beliefs which the West has sought to wish upon the world, many of which they now repudiate with a zeal similar to that which they once pursued in imposing them – one has only to think of the racism which characterised their missions of conquest, and which the rulers of the West now disavow so noisily.

To seek to re-arrange patterns of relationships are just such another attempt to control. That it should be done under the banner of liberation comes as no

surprise. After all, those who travelled into the dark places of the earth in the early colonial period did so in secure possession of the truth, and saw their 'mission' as one of enlightenment and emancipation of those in thrall to ancient superstition and misapprehension of the world. So it is with today's missionaries of sexual liberation. The trouble is, they want everyone *to be like us*; or as much like us as it is possible for them to be, given the disadvantages under which they labour.

This project gains plausibility from the fact that the Western societies have the wealth, coveted life-styles, security and space for individual self-expression, which others yearn for. As a corollary of this, surely, all other aspects of society must change, precisely in the direction of that taken by privilege. A readiness to acknowledge the superiority of the Western mould in almost everything stems from the economic power of the west. Whether this power can be replicated, along with the lifestyles, which accompany it, is a question that has not been fully examined.

The ideology, the convictions, the revelations by which the people of other religious and social faiths live, are not going to yield to external pressure, even though for the West, projects of conversion now have a social and economic, rather than religious, basis. The politics of identity strikes at more intractable characteristics than those 'fundamental' attributes of gender, sexual orientation or skin colour, as defined by the West. The power of religious belief cannot be wished away or washed away even by affluence beyond imagination: the experience of a county like Saudi Arabia ought to be instructive in this respect.

If Islam embodies a 'pre-modern' consciousness, this also leaves large areas of human interaction in penumbra, where people act, behave, have sexual and emotional relationships, love one another, without perceiving anything in this which involves definitions of identity. In this context, friendships and attachments, sexual and emotional relationships exist, free of scrutiny, self-consciousness or self-reproach. Only when named 'gay' or 'homosexual', do they become problematic.

A more subtle and reflective evaluation of other cultures would recognise, not only *their* failings, but also the inadequacies of the dominant culture, which the people of the West inhabit. But no inadequacies are admitted in the individualistic, competitive and reductively primitive society, which exports itself globally with such exuberant and *intolerant* self-confidence.