

HOMOSEXUALITY AS A PHENOMENON

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"You shall not oppress a stranger (ger), for you know the feelings of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt"(Exodus 23:9; cf. 22:20)

Abstract . Bismillah al-rahman al-rahim ... In the name of God, the compassionate One, the One who cares. Most religions are very clear on their stance on homosexuality, especially the three monotheistic ones, yet we see an increasing global divide in the opinions regarding the subject, and it seems that most of the condemnation arises from religious beliefs. This paper looks at the psychological and anatomical aspects of sexual orientation and attempts to put forward the idea of revisiting our religious perceptions of homosexuality, to rethink and evaluate our attitudes towards the homosexual individuals of our societies.

With the age old debate of whether homosexuality is “born or made”, one thing that can be stated as a fact is that one has little power in choosing their sexual orientation. This alone makes it imperative for the religious advocates to re-visit the idea of homosexuality, as stated in their religion, in order to ensure they are themselves not shunning rightful members of their religious societies. This in no way means challenging God’s Will, but challenging the human perception of The Word of God.

Index Terms:- : Monotheistic religions; homosexuality; condemnation; perceptions; re-think.

I. INTRODUCTION

The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery, and placing her in the midst they said to him, “Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. Now in the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?” This they said to test him, that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. And as they continued to ask him, he stood up and said to them, “Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her.”(John 8:3-7)

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 (Koran 49:13)

One’s sexual orientation is typically defined as the individual’s pattern of sexual, romantic and emotional attractions. For centuries, homosexuals have fought for their rights but only recently began to get recognition and approval in societies, particularly in the West. The Eastern societies, however, particularly those dominated by religion, remain strong in their opinions of homosexual activity as being unacceptable and worthy of immediate punishment. What remains constant though, in both societies, is the number of individuals coming out as homosexuals, demanding equal

rights. But where the American psychology association board of trustees removed homosexuality from its official diagnostic manual, The Diagnostic and Statistic Manual of Mental Disorders, Second Edition (DSMII) 1973, it is thought punishable by death in some Eastern countries like Yemen, Sudan, Iran, Iraq, Nigeria, Mauritania, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Somalia.

This paper explores any possibilities that may exist in the reconciliation between religious communities and cultures and the homosexual individuals.

A. Nature vs. Nurture The question of whether homosexuals are ‘born or made’ has undergone hot scrutiny for decades. The age old debate on the importance of nature vs. nurture, that is, the importance of individuals’ innate qualities (nature) vs. their acquired and learned qualities (nurture) has been the point in question.

In time, though, both the aspects of human development have come out to be of equal importance. It brings to light the aspects of human behavior, that are inborn, and the ones that are educated or learned.

There are many traits that are inherited by individuals, for example physical traits include the color of the hair, eyes, one’s weight, height etc. and other aspects, such as life expectancy, vulnerability to illnesses like cancer, alzheimer’s disease etc. This notion has also lead people to debate over other aspects of personality that may be inherited, such as personality attributes, mental illnesses or abilities etc. (McLeod, 2007).

Consequently, the field of Human Health care debated that if a person comes from a line of breast cancer, will they be at a higher risk of the illness, and will the environmental factors, such as diet etc. have nothing to do with it? They discovered that some families with no background of chronicle diseases may still develop them, thus they reached a conclusion that it is in-fact a product of both the inherited gene and also the experiences of the individual (Ann, 2006).

Similarly, they discovered that at times criminals may not necessarily be coming from a line of people that have a history of committing crimes, but it could be due to exposure to excessive violence, aggression, anger etc., therefore, concluding that it is not only the nature of an individual, but also their environment and experiences that contribute to such behavior (Ann, 2006).

Researchers agree that how one is 'nurtured', for example how the parents bring up their child, plays an important part in the child's gender identity (ID), there are other elements that play enormous parts in determining the gender ID, such as their language skills' development, labeling of sexual behavior etc. It is something that is developed and learned over time, along with other factors such as parents' aggression, tolerance etc (Ann, 2006).

According to the Parent Manipulation Theory, one's gender identity is something that is learned over time, and a number of elements contribute to the final outcome. According to this theory, it is something that is controllable, depending on parental control, interaction etc. In contrast to this, The KinSelection Theory says that children are born with some traits, including their gender identity, which have nothing to do with the environment they are put in, and these are part of their genetic makeup. This theory refers to individuals' 'total reproductive fitness', which includes both direct and indirect fitness. The direct fitness comes from the reproducing individual and the indirect fitness from the reproducing individual's relatives as an outcome to their actions. In this case, the homosexual men, though themselves only likely to reproduce at a 20% rate in comparison with heterosexual men may pass on their gene by closely interacting with children in their families like nieces and nephews (Wilson, 1975-1978).

Looking into religion, according to the Islamic belief, God created man with a fitrah. Fitrah is defined as a natural, inborn predisposition which is impossible to change. All humans are born with the fitrah, i.e. with complete submission to Allah, the One God and an inclination towards the right actions. If a child is left alone and grows up in seclusion, he will naturally be a believer. In other words, anything which is done against Allah's command is seen to be a consequence of the environment he grows up in (Al-Farabi 801-873CE; Al-Farabi, 260H-339H; Ibn Sina, 370-1037; Al-Ghazali, 1058-1111; Ibn Rushd, 1126-1198; Ibn Khaldun 1332-1406). In other words, Fitrah is associated with being born a Muslim and believing that there is no god but Allah and Muhammad (PBUH) is His last messenger (Tawheed). Basically, fitrah is the tool which Allah ingrained in all human beings, to recognize Him (Ibn Manzûr, Lisân al-'Arab al-Muhîr, 1984). Tawheed is recognized as: 1). Tawheed-ul-Rububiyah, recognizing Allah's omnipotence and 2). Tawheed-ul-Ululiyah, recognizing worship as solely Allah's right.

This is why it is believed that since homosexuality is an unnatural state, it is a consequence of the environment, because the human body naturally submits to God, so does the human thought, belief and soul

(http://www.furaat.org/index.php?option=com_videoflow&task=play&id=10226 Dr. Zakir Naik- Why is Homosexuality Condemned in Islam; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=btcYReOffg> Khalid Yasin-Immorality of Homosexuality; Abdullah Hakim "Islam's Hidden Homosexuals" p.12).

B. Nativism The 'nature' is also known as 'nativism'. To explain it further, it is a school of philosophical thought, which advocates that some things in life are natural, as the name suggests, it represents that some basic skills are ingrained in our brains, or are 'native'. That is, they exist already, before we are born, they are hard-wired. It was famous philosophers, such as Socrates and Plato, that said that certain things are inborn and there is not much one can do to change them.

The psychology of nativism is in contrast with empiricism, according to which individuals are born with a 'blank slate'. According to nativists, infants are born with mental machinery.

At the APA's 2009 Annual Convention, a leading proponent of the Harvard University, Susan, E. Carey, PhD shared her theory on the concept of nativism:

"The problem I've been interested in my whole career is what makes it possible for humans beings to think the kinds of thoughts we can think?" Carey said. "We're the only animals who can ponder global warming and pancreatic cancer."

According to her, conceptual learning can occur only if our minds are first familiarized with the 'order information', which is through primitive or innate mechanisms. It is seen that to come to full-fledge conclusions or concepts, human beings take this system as a starting point. According to Human Neonate Studies, if infants start very early to show a retention of certain skills, then they were probably born with those, i.e., they are innate and haven't been taught

(<http://www.essortment.com/perceptual-psychology-nativismvs-empiricism-16772.html> perceptual psychology: nativism vs. empiricism).

Their basic assumption is that the characteristics of the human species as a whole are a product of evolution and individual differences are due to each person's unique genetic code. These are characteristics that may not be visible at birth, but emerge with time, during the process of maturation (McLeod, 2007).

It has been argued that an individual does not make conscious choice in her/his sexual orientation (Drescher 2002; Shidlo et al. 2002) and equally strong evidence shows that because it is part of the physical/biological or psychological makeup, it is close to impossible to change one's sexual orientation, though the advocates of conversion/repetitive therapy seem to think otherwise (Nicolosi 1997).

C. Sexual Orientation

Sexual orientation refers to one's romantic and sexual interests in another person, i.e., one's desire to spend a life with the other person, to be attached to them physically, emotionally and sexually. This can be some one of their

own sex, the opposite sex, or both the sexes, which is what makes people homo., hetro. or bi-sexual. One's desire to spend a life with another person, be married to them and have babies with them is beyond the desire of sex. Sexual orientation is also the individual's sexual or gender identity, based on these attractions. Research shows that sexual orientation ranges on a continuum, from extreme, nominal to minimal attraction to the same, opposite or both sexes (<http://www.psychiatry.org/lgbtsexual-orientation>)

Sexual orientation is, however, generally listed in three categories: a) heterosexual: feeling emotionally, romantically and sexually attracted to the opposite sex, b) homosexual (lesbian/gay): feeling emotionally, romantically and sexually attracted to the same sex, and c) bisexual: feeling emotionally, romantically and sexually attracted to both the sexes. Sexual orientation is distinct from other components of sex and gender, including biological sex (the anatomical, physiological, and genetic characteristics associated with being male or female), gender identity (the psychological sense of being male or female), and social gender role (the cultural norms that define feminine and masculine behavior) (<http://www.apa.org/topics/lgbt/orientation.pdf>)

Sexual orientation is generally viewed as a determinant of the sexual relationship one has with others, this view is wrong, one's sexual orientation is defined by their relationship with others, such as holding hands, kissing, it is not solely the act of sexual intercourse, but beyond it, i.e., it is related to one's intimate relationship with others, their most deeply felt needs of love (<http://www.apa.org/topics/lgbt/orientation.pdf>).

The argument, in fact, dates back to the ancient Greeks. Aristophanes, while exploring homosexuality, defined it as a 'long term fulfillment of the soul', though not even termed as homosexuality, according to him, one's sexual desires are not strong enough to be the cause of creation of homosexuality, it is the longing of two individuals to be soul mates and life partners. (Ryan D. Johnson, 2003). The Spartans are also viewed in the light of homosexuality causing intense emotional bonds.

In 1991, Simon leway presented a different brain structure in gay and straight men. He found that the hypothalamus in a gay man is smaller than that of a heterosexual man. The hypothalamus is the area of the brain which is responsible for many functions. Studies show a particular pattern in heterosexual men and women, and an almost reversed pattern in sex-atypical behavior (Swaab, 2008). According to current research, one's sexual differentiation occurs in the fetus and during non-natal development, i.e. one's feelings of being male or female, hetro., homo. or bi-sexual (Swaab, 2008).

In Islam, it is believed that usually-but not always, one's gender identity is in consistency with their biological sex. Though accessible scholarly work on how Islam looks at varied versions of sexual orientation is little, there are religious and cultural expectations of individuals to act in consistency with their biological sex. There is an existence of Hadith regarding individuals whose actions and behavior

are not in consistency with their biological gender, like one from Sunan Abu-Dawud, (Bk. 32, No. 4087) which refers to men dressing up like women as being cursed, however some researchers have declared the hadith as problematic. (Wadud, 1999; Hassan, 2003; Mernissi, 1996). However, it is necessary to study the works of feminists and reformists, like Wadud, Hassan and Mernissi, the scholars who have studied gender and sexuality in Islam. These scholars have explored and come up with varied versions of definitions of gender, gender roles and sexuality as per the Shari'ah (Islamic Law). For example, by re-visiting verses that speak of the gender roles and differences, they came up with a new version stating that contrary to popular belief, men are not deemed superior to women. These movements of Islamic Scholars to re-visit and re-study the Islamic verses and reevaluate their interpretations in the present day, in order to illuminate the inequality and injustice plaguing the Muslim societies, in the name of religion, is known as the 'reformist Islam' or 'progressive Islam' (<http://www.safraproject.org/sgigenderroles.htm> . Also see http://www.safraproject.org/bibliography_sgib.htm)

This is so because unlike the Koran itself, the Shari'ah is not a direct reflection of God's will, but a human interpretation of it, which by all means can be faulty. Hence these scholars are in no way challenging God's word, but only challenging its interpretations made by humans (largely males) in the past (An-Na'im, 1990 and Rahman, 1970).

Some authors point out that the Koran clearly acknowledges that there are some creations that neither fit in the male, nor female category: "To God belongs the dominion over the heavens and the earth. He creates what He wills. He prepares for whom He wills females, and He prepares for whom He wills males. Or He marries together the males and the females, and He makes those whom He wills to be ineffectual (barren)"(Koran-42:49-50). It is argued that instead of the traditional interpretation of these verses, which recognize them as Allah giving sons or daughters to whoever He wills and both sons and daughters to whom He wills, these refer to different genders and sexual orientations (<http://www.well.com/user/aquarius/Qurannotes.htm>).

D. PREVAILING DIFFERENCE IN VIEWS AMONG SOCIETIES

There are varying views on homosexuality in the western and eastern societies, and even more varying views within each society. Simply put, the entire world is divided on its views on homosexuality. These views have varied in different cultures and historical periods, along with the general attitude on relationships, sexual activity and desires. Even today, all cultures differ in their value pertaining to appropriate and inappropriate sexual behavior.

Some cultures authorize homosexual behavior, while others disapprove of it, and some sanction it in part, which is similar to heterosexual behavior, where differing arrays of attitudes may be attached to heterosexual behavior depending on the individuals' gender, social status, class, and/or age.

Looking into history, many cultures only considered reproductive sex to be the sexual norm- at times exclusively heterosexual behavior and at other times considering same-sex love or relationships alongside the norm.

In the modern times, many Western countries have seen soaring support and approval of LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) rights (along with the acknowledgement of anti-discrimination laws, homosexual marriages, and so on). Around the 1970s, homosexual marriages were mostly accepted in the West as long as both individuals were of legal age. Before it, the predominant idea of people being LGBT had been a consequence of child abuse, upbringing or other social factors/influences.

In 2013, a survey done on the global attitudes by the Pew Research Center revealed a general approval of homosexuality in the Northern America, much of Latin America and The European Union, but it also revealed an equally rampant rejection and denial towards same-sex marriages and relationships in the Muslim nations, Africa and certain parts of Russia and Asia.

Basically, the survey found less acceptance of homosexuality in regions where religion was more in practice.

The countries where religion is less central to people's lives, also among the richer countries are more accepting of homosexuality, where as the poorer countries are not. Another factor revealed by the survey was age, where younger people were mostly seen to be more tolerant of homosexuality, and women proved to be consistently more tolerant of homosexuality than men

(<http://www.pewglobal.org/files/2013/06/Pew-GlobalAttitudes-Homosexuality-Report-FINAL-JUNE-4-2013.pdf> The Global Divide on Homosexuality, 2013).

In the Eastern countries, the acceptance of homosexuality continues to struggle. Concerns regarding LGBT continue to prevail and have remained so throughout history. Though the rights of LGBT continue to face extreme criticism in the East, some reformation is also seen in a few countries. The same survey, by the Pew Research Center revealed that when presented with the question, "should society accept homosexuality?" the Sub-Saharan Africa and Middle Eastern countries showed the lowest amount of resilience for homosexuality. In certain countries such as Jordan, Egypt, Palestine and Tunisia, there was a 90% 'NO' as response to the question. In comparison with a similar survey done in 2007, it shows that the attitudes have moved towards more intolerance with time, where they have fallen to 7%, from 14% in Turkey, to 3% from 6% in Jordan, and in the Palestinian territories, down to 4% from 9%. Though some parts showed increasing shift in their acceptance levels, such as South Korea, which shifted to 39% from 18%

(<http://www.pewglobal.org/files/2013/06/Pew-GlobalAttitudes-Homosexuality-Report-FINAL-JUNE-4-2013.pdf> The Global Divide on Homosexuality, 2013).

The Asian countries show even more intolerance, where homosexuality is outlawed in almost 20 countries. Among these countries, the Israeli law alone provides some leverage to the LGBT rights (<http://www.acri.org.il/en/> The Association for Civil Rights in Israel). In countries such as Brunei, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, Iran and Yemen, homosexuality is punishable by

death penalty

(http://old.ilga.org/statehomophobia/charts/ILGA_LGBTI_Human_rights_Asia_2013.pdf Asia from a Lesbian and Gay Human Rights Perspective, 2013). The juristic punishment prescribed for sodomy varies, where some decree capital punishment, whereas some decree slightly moderate punishment, like imprisonment. Though some secular Muslim countries like Turkey, Jordan and Indonesia are more tolerant, and it has recently gained legality in Singapore. (<http://www.roughguides.com/> Rough Guide to South East Asia: Third Edition, 2005).

E. DIFFERENCES IN RELIGIOUS VIEWS ON HOMOSEXUALITY

Homosexuality is a topic much talked about, much condemned and disliked, especially when looked at in the light of religion, yet there is a shocking increase in the number of LGBT around the world. Islam is very clear on homosexuality:

"Indeed, you approach men with desire, instead of women. Rather, you are transgressing people." (Al'Araf Verse :82).

"So We saved him and his family, except for his wife; she was of those who remained [with the evildoers]." (Al'Araf Verse: 84).

Hence, history witnesses the agonizing end of the nation better remembered as 'the city that was turned upside down', and the miraculous deliverance of Lot and his family, save his wife, 'who also was among the evil doers'.

The story reads simple: Like other prophets' Lot's people refused to accept him, as God's messenger, which brought about their destruction and indulged in transgression, where they performed intercourse with men, instead of their 'natural' partners, which played as a catalyst in their end. In spite of Lot's repeated warnings:

"What do you do such, as never any being in all the world committed before you? See you approach men lustfully, instead of women; no you are a people who exceed." (The Battlements, 7/78-82)

Eventually they were faced with dire consequences.

"Then the (Awful) Cry overtook them at the sunrise.

And We utterly confounded them, and We rained upon them stones of heated clay.” (73-74)

The story of Lot first appeared in the biblical book of Genesis, chapter 19, before it was recast in the Koran, Lot is seen to welcome two angels, disguised as travelers into his house, when a large group of men gathers outside, demanding the surrender of the travelers, “so that we may know them.” ‘Know’, here, is a reference to their sodomy. Here, Lot shows the ultimate desperate act to save his guests from the intruders, i.e., he offers his daughters so that they may leave the two travelers alone, but the mob outside refuses the offer (Book of Genesis, chapter 19).

In Torah, the book of Judaism, LGBT is similarly condemned, referring to the act as to'eivah, i.e. something that is abhorred or detested, and can be subject to capital punishment under the Jewish law. “Thou shalt not lie with mankind, as with womankind; it is abomination.” The book of Vayikra (Leviticus) - chapter 18:22

In the Koran, out of a hundred and fourteen surahs, fourteen passages make reference to Lot: Al-An'am:85-87, Al-Ar'af:78-82, Surah Hud: 73 and 79-84, a;-hijr:58-77, Al-Anbya':70-71 and 74-75, Al-Haj:43-44, Ash-Shu'ara:160-176, An-Naml:55-59, Al-Ankabut:25 and 27-34, As-Saffat:133-138, AlMa'idah:11-14, Surah Qaf:12-13, Al-Qamar:33-40 and the last

At-Tahrim:10, which only makes a reference to Lot's wife.

The Buddhism teachings on sexual orientation may vary, depending on the school. Buddhism is either silent about any sexual conduct or the Zen Buddhist teachings, without making a mention of the type of sexual conduct, only makes a mention that one shall not harm the other in gaining sexual gratification, which would only mean practices such as pedophilia or ascetic masochism are considered violations. Though the Tibetan Buddhism's, evolving from the Dalai Lama perspective, views are complex. But to put it simply, Dalai Lama condemned publically the violence against LGBT, yet he was also reported saying in a press conference in 1997 that “from a Buddhist point of view [lesbian and gay sex] is generally considered sexual misconduct.” The Buddhist stance on homosexuality is, hence, somewhat mixed.

F. VARIOUS AUTHORS' VIEWS

A different perspective presented of homosexuality, as presented in the Koran, by Dr. Scott Siraj al-Haqq Kugle, the author of “Homosexuality in Islam” sheds new light on the subject, offering, what he calls, a progressive interpretation of the Koran. His interpretations represented in his book are focused on how morality, sexuality and diversity are treated in the Koran. By minutely observing various Koranic verses, Kugle has criticized classical Islamic jurists and theologians. He concludes that the Koran is unclear in its approach towards the question of homosexuality and the rest of the

“marginal” sexualities. It presents an analytical view of the linguistic fluctuation in the Koran. For example, he maintains that each Muslim is challenged by the Koran to seek a suitable partner/mate. Kugle elaborates that the Koran uses the term *zawj* to represent “partner” and its gender is unclear, because of its grammatically masculine nature, even when used as a reference for a female. Hence he concludes that The Koran actually does not specify the gender of the partner one is permitted to choose.

In other words, to understand the real meaning of the Koran, we need to look at a “word-word” definition of the related verses. According to Izutsu's explanation, to translate something from a foreign language one needs to look for the closest synonym in the mother tongue to avoid an unbiased translation, though the non-native readers will be at a disadvantage throughout, because of an oft occurring complete lack of a synonym in the readers' language. The length of this paper, however does not allow me to go into such detail, but it is important to bear in mind that although a reader of the Koran may doubtlessly harbor the best motive to understand God's word, she or he must also understand that reading the translation alone will most certainly alter or maybe even ruin the meaning sometimes, and even with the best intentions, the foreign-tongue reader might understand it incorrectly or differently, going by its translations supported by the reader's and translator's mother tongues. Izutsu, therefore, renders the translated Koran as a good guiding tool, but feels that in order to understand the precise, unbiased meaning; the language itself must be learnt and understood (Izutsu, 1966). Hence, it must be kept in mind that for certain words, there is no always a precise word-match, and actually may not fit at all in the reader's native language, as a result to which, the reader would naturally have to look for closest synonyms, which could change the meaning of the text somewhat, if not entirely (Izutsu, 1966).

In Izutsu's text, he makes mention of an example, that for quite some time the Arabic philologists themselves regarded the Arabic word *jahl* as a definite opposite of the word ‘ilm’, and it is translated in the pre-Quranic times as ‘ignorance’. The most crucial derivative of the word is *jahiliyah*, which is used to express the pre-Islamic conditions, was hence accepted and translated as “Age of Ignorance”, in specific reference, denoting one's ignorance of God. This however, was prior to Ignaz Goldziher's demonstration through his study *Muhammedanische Studien*, published in 1888. What Goldziher did was to collect:

A large number of important examples of the actual use of the root *JHL* in pre-Islamic poetry, subjected them to a careful analysis, and reached the remarkable conclusion that the usual traditional opinion about *jahiliyah* was fundamentally erroneous. *Jahl*, according to his conclusion, is not the opposite of ‘ilm; in its primary sense, it stands opposed to *hilm*, which denotes ‘the moral reasonableness

of a civilized man' (Nicholson [R.A. Nicholson, *A Literary History of the Arabs*, 1953]), including roughly speaking such characteristics as forbearance, patience, clemency, and freedom from blind passion. If we add to these another important element,

'power'...the picture is complete. In later usage, and sometimes even in pre-Islamic poetry, we find *jahl* used as the real antithesis of '*ilm*', but only in a secondary and derivative sense; its primary semantic function is to refer to the implacable, reckless temper of the pagal Arabs. (Izutsu, 1966)

Hence it was emphasized by Izutsu that to abstain from distorting the meaning going by the "word-word" definitions, further measures to avoid the risk would be to change the "word-word" definition into a "word-thing" definition. Izutsu explains that this can be achieved, for example, by compiling particular terms from the Koran, and comparing and checking them against each other, in order to get an original (or its closest possible) "word-thing" meaning of the unfamiliar/foreign word.

A detailed look at the root-words from the surahs that are frequently associated with same-sex act suggest that these terms actually neither condemn nor endorse the idea of same-sex practices, they are, in fact, put on the same surface of ethics, as inappropriate hetero-sexual sexual activities. (Ebrahim, A., 2007).

On Ken Collins' web site, the story of Lot, as it appears in the Book of Genesis is discussed thoroughly. He includes an in-depth study of the word "know", as it appears in chapter 19, parts 3-5. It is traditionally interpreted as being synonymous to rape, which means that the men outside Lot's house gathered with the desire to rape the angels that came down as visitors.

Translated from the Hebrew language, the word "know" can only have two possible meanings, the first being "being acquainted with", and the second meaning "having intercourse with." Traditionally (and because of a lack of alternative interpretations), in this verse, "know" is taken to represent the latter meaning. It must be noted though that out of the 936 times that the Hebrew word "know" occurs in the Old Testament, it occurs as meaning "having intercourse with" approximately only a dozen times, that too only as reference to marital intercourse.

The verse, when evaluated, giving both the meanings of "know" equal credit, some interesting observations come out. According to the verse, every single male present in the city gathered with the intent of "knowing" the guests. The traditional view, hence, guides to two conclusions: firstly, all of the male population in Sodom was homosexual;

But he urged them strongly; so they turned aside to him and entered his house; and he made them a feast, and baked unleavened bread, and they ate. But before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man, surrounded the house; and they called to Lot, "Where are the men who came to you tonight?

Bring them out to us, that we may know them." (Genesis 19:3-5) The second it so happened that the entire population's sexual appetite happened to befall simultaneously that night! On the other hand, considering the word's former meaning, i.e. "being acquainted with", since the guests entered Sodom at dusk, in a time when there was no use of artificial light, and went to the foreigner's house directly (Note that Lot himself was a foreigner in Sodom) the idea that all of the male population present in Sodom wanted to cross-examine or "know" the strangers is much more plausible.

According to Collins, a number of questions arise from the understanding of the Biblical verses concerning Lot and the people of Sodom. First and most controversial is his offer of his two daughters to the mob. If they had come with the intent to rape the visitors, then his offer signifies that he would have allowed his daughters to be gang raped, had they accepted the offer. Another point that arises is Lot's offer of the females in the first place, knowing he was confronted with a 'homosexual' mob. Lot goes on to refer to the mob as "brothers" in verses 19:6-8.

But in the next verse:

But they said, "Stand back!" And they said, "This fellow came to sojourn, and he would play the judge! Now will we deal worse with you than with them." Then they pressed hard against the man Lot, and drew near to break the door. (Genesis 19:9)

The daughters are not rejected by the mob, which would be expected from a homosexual gang, who refer to Lot as the 'fellow who came to sojourn', meaning while Lot refers to them as brothers, they still look at him as an outsider. The mob threatens Lot to deal with him in a worse manner than the guests, which would imply that Lot would be subject to even worse sexual abuse, though there is no mention of an attempt to rape Lot in the text.

A different perspective to the story of Lot could be that he offered his daughters to the mob, which he refers to as "brothers", to be kept hostage, in order to confirm the visitors' conduct (which was a custom in those times).

The traditional perception of the Jewish scripture has also come into question in the recent years, where the two verses: 18:23 and 20:13, from Leviticus, which convey clear-cut censure of male homosexual intercourse (though it is debated whether this mentions intercourse in specific or all kinds of sexual acts between men).

"If a man lies with a man as one lies with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall surely be put to death; their blood shall be upon them." Leviticus (20:13)

Though what is evident is that the scripture does not express condemnation for any female same-sex sexual acts, but commentators later on did condemn lesbianism as well, describing it as promiscuous and lewd, but still they do not

regard it as a capital offense. The verses mentioned also indicate that it is not the homosexual himself, but the act of homosexuality that is disapproved.

The word "abomination" has also gotten much attention, meaning to'evah in Hebrew, and similar terminology is used in 14:3 of Deuteronomy, in referring a forbidden animal. Various traditional sources relate the cruelty of the "abomination" by indicating the reason for the homosexual act being abominable as its procreative potential. Sefer HaHinuch, a medieval book, thought provoking in nature presents a comparison between homosexual sex and marriage with a barren woman.

Nevertheless, the liberal-minded Jews continue to struggle to understand the traditional Jewish position on the topic and the former sect continues to debate on whether or not the homosexuals can be part of their religious communities, and to what extent. The most important notion that comes out of the Jewish teachings is the individuals' responsibility to only those religious obligations which he can "only freely choose to fulfill" and to study and establish homosexuals' religious rights, many utilize the research emphasizing the uncontrolled or automatic characteristic of homosexuality. Ahnoos, which is a legal term, is used to refer to an individual who is directed to do something, but lacks actual control in the matter. Hence some authorities also argue that since homosexuality is involuntary, it should not be abhorred and forbidden.

G. CASE STUDY: INTERVIEWS WITH TWO ASIAN HOMOSEXUALS

The following case study will reflect on the youth, who have made up their minds that they are homosexuals, regardless of their cultural and religious beliefs.

One-on-one interviews were conducted with two individuals: The first a 22 year old Muslim male, originally from Lahore, Pakistan, studying in the United States at the time of the interview and the other a 23 year old Jewish female, originally from India, studying in UK, at the time of the interview.

The questions were constructed to find out what goes on in these their minds, how they realized they are homosexuals and how they perceive it now, their earliest feelings of being attracted to the same sex, their own reactions to it, along with those around them.

The results revealed that there is actually no element of choice in the participants' sexual orientation. It is evident the kind of difficult times the first participant has gone through, growing up and living in Pakistan, he had to face a lot of problems and dilemmas concerning the people in his life, starting from the very close ones to the distant. For the second participant, agrees that she has not faced any troubles most of her life, concerning her sexuality, which is perhaps because she has lived in UK most of her life, it was still noted that even she had no element of choice in her sexual orientation.

Nothing contributed. I think um ...nothing contributes to you being who you are. If I were to say to you what contributed to your being hetro-sexual, it doesn't make sense.

The first participant had to face numerous challenges, trying to make a place within his peers, and being 'normal', in the world's eye.

There is difficulty this way on the social level or the family level. I don't think anyone anywhere would want to get bullied in school or get harassed in the streets, not that I was harassed on the streets, but still.

According to him, if he had had an element of choice, he wouldn't choose to be homosexual, especially growing up in Pakistan, which, being a 'Muslim' country, is not accepting of homosexuality.

It was seen that now in their adulthood, the two have come to terms with their sexual orientation, and have accepted it as a part of themselves.

According to the first interviewee, it is important to be true to one's self, and not be in self-denial, in order to understand one's self better.

He was still in that process of, as you say, self-denial, so there's nothing like that with me, I am pretty open to myself, at least! But obviously I have to be very careful, being in the kind of, I don't know, social context or family background I come from.

According to the second interviewee, it is something that one is, either one is homosexual and heterosexual, and a question of being normal, or thinking that there is something wrong with her did not even come in the picture for her. um.. well, it is who I am, I don't want to be different, so it is a part of me which makes myself who I am, so it is as natural as anything else would be, if you were to be gay or straight, then that's who you are.

It seems that for someone who realizes that s/he is homosexual and is living in Pakistan, it becomes essential to hide a part of them from the world, family and friends.

I feel there is a huge part of me that they don't know, that's because I've chosen it to be that way, but that's because of certain constraints, practical constraints

For someone living in London, though, opening up still seems hard, or tricky to say the least:

Um...not right away, I told certain people, that is a general question, but I eventually did come out, so now about everyone does know.

Even in one of the most liberal parts of the world, coming out can pose problems, however it seems that accepting one's self as a homosexual, especially for someone in Pakistan would be the toughest part.

My personal challenges, I guess would come from a place like school, where obviously I wasn't that secure, where all the people didn't love me, like my family did, so they didn't feel like they were wrong, when they are following their way of thinking, trying to put me down, so I guess school, for me, was a bit challenging.

On being asked how they think being gay has affected their personalities, these were their responses:

I don't feel like it has affected my character as such, as in my morals, my values, I don't think they're effected much. It has made me a bit of an atheist... For the second interviewee: um.. well, it is who I am, I don't want to be different, so it is a part of me which makes myself who I am, so it is as natural as anything else would be, if you were to be gay or straight, then that's who you are.

In fact, it seems that if the first interviewee really did have a choice, he would not choose to be homosexual, he had to go through a lot of trauma and a long difficult time, because of his homosexuality when right after his first encounter with another man, his father passed away, he blamed himself for the death and felt that he was being punished by God for what he had done.

I just like, it meta-physically came out, being punished, because of the karma and stuff like that, so that was a big downer, so that's that.

One of the last words from the first interviewee were:

Because I am a very ambitious person, I feel like I will have to sacrifice, I will keep on having to sacrifice my true identity, because I want a certain kind of career, and that career cannot put up with the gay business, then I don't really care, my sexual habits are not that important, they are just one part of me. I always say I'm not just gay, I am also gay, and that's just one part of me.

Most of this proves that homosexuality is a part of one's life that they have no control over, in other words, whether it is the way they are created naturally, or it is something that they acquire from their nature and surroundings, there is hardly any element of choice in it.

H. IS RECONCILIATION POSSIBLE?

I. (DISCUSSION)

"Gay Muslims" is a documentary by Channel 4 on five Homosexual Muslims in UK, who are shown challenging the prejudices against homosexuals in their communities and advocate the diversity in Islam

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1f80pNyoL6A>).

Moreover, Daayiee Abdullah , Muhsin Hendricks , LudovicMohamed Zahed and Hashim Jansen are openly gay Imams from America, South Africa, France and Netherlands, respectively. Hence, though the religious communities might be taking baby steps towards a change in mind set, it seems there is a growing tolerance and understanding for homosexuals.

Presenting his take on homosexuality, Imam Muhsin Hendricks (2011) says being determined to find out what God Himself says/feels about homosexuals, he set off studying religion, and has come to the conclusion that the term 'homosexuality' is completely absent from the Koran,

though there is a mention of people who are not attracted to women (Koran- 24:31). He goes on to say that if one were to study the context of the story of Lot's nation, it would be made clear that the reference of same-sex act is made as one of coercion, and not consent, that is, it speaks about males raping

males
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4bBPcIHk9mc>).

Additionally, Tariq Ramadan (2010) an Egyptian writer, is of the opinion that because homosexuality is not in consistency with the 'divine project', which is the creation of man for a woman and woman for a man, it cannot be acceptable.

However, he goes on to add that 'mutual respect' is the key to all religions, which means that homosexuals being "targeted, discriminated, put in jail" is also unacceptable. Though it might not be a choice, but it is a test one is born with, and if that test is homosexuality, it is something one has to constantly fight and struggle with.

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wsaWjxkZB3w>).

Are these developments suggestive of reconciliation between the religious communities and the homosexuals? Additionally, as the results of the Pew Research Center global survey on homosexuality (2013) suggest, the acceptance of homosexuality in the richer countries and a significant difference between the broader female perception of same-sex sexuality, as opposed to conservative male perception. Additionally, the liberal mind set of the youth on the subject. Does this mean that with the growing female population worldwide and changing socio-economic status of the Eastern countries, should lead to a growing understanding and approval of the homosexuals by today's youth in days to come? "They are seeing this coming from the West. They are saying because its coming from the west, the harsher we are, the more Muslims we are. It is not that, Islam is not about being harsh, Islam is about being Just and Right." (Tariq Ramadan, 2010).

Or as the results of the Pew Research Center survey also suggest, the growing intolerance for homosexuals in countries like Turkey, Jordan, Palestine, Tunisia there is no hope for them foreseeing a brighter, less discriminatory future?

Another factor that is of concern is whether the condemnation of homosexuality is largely a cultural problem, as opposed to being a religious one. The survey also brings to mind that homosexuals are most hated in the most conservative countries, such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Iran and Yemen. Could that mean that the discrimination is basically cultural? The homosexual youth today is resorting to marriage of convenience, known as "Lavender Marriage", which is especially seen in Asians, many of the homosexual individuals prefer marrying gay partners of the opposite sex, and continue living their homosexual relationship on the outside, rather than risk their

families' and societies' wrath.
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Pkf8891BFs>).

Another point to ponder is that though the work of Islamic reformists like Wadud, Hassan, Mernissi and Christians such as Ken Collins, the ordained minister of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) USA, John Pavlovitz, a pastor in North Carolina , and Jewish reformists like Margaret Moers Wenig and Margaret Holub might open debate, but one might question, is it not the primary affair of reformists to create disharmony? However, it is true that though the monotheistic religions speak of God's wrath on the wrong-doers, they include much more on God's love for all humans and urge humans to indulge in critical thinking over blindly submitting to the human interpretation of His Word, whereby making it incumbent upon us to question existing versions set by the 'ambassadors' of religion.

God's distaste is fundamentally rooted in perversion. The ulema, pastors and rabbis must understand that in this case, what seems like perversion to a heterosexual comes as nature to the LGBT. To blame them for their nature would be to disapprove of God's Creation, and that alone is reason enough for us to live in peace and respect. It is expected of us to understand our brothers and sisters in humanity and to respect them as individuals and at least be tolerant towards them.

The conventional claim that most religions are clear on homosexuality is but a viewpoint that has unfortunately travelled down for centuries; unsullied and only recently began being questioned. A relationship with God, in any religion should be personal and direct and because we have the right to question, it becomes our God given duty, and a spiritual obligation to disagree with one another in harmony and respect.

The sudden increase in the number of homosexuals coming out of the closet, over the past few years has caught us offguard. These individuals are coming from all sorts of religious and social backgrounds, and increasing in number by day. Having shunned the homosexuals from religious societies, we have to re-think some ideas: is what has been said about our religions being absolutely clear on homosexuality by traditional scholars true? Is it "one of the most dangerous crimes", worthy of being punished by death? Is there no other option for Muslims, Christians or Jews, who also declare themselves homosexual, but to be rejected from the religious communities? Instead of relying on expert interpretations, it may be time to take charge of our own minds and be critical of how we are, by God's Will, expected to view individual differences.

When the earth quakes her violent shakings

And the earth bears forth her weighty burdens
The human being declares, "What is with her?"

That day, she speaks of what's happened with her
All that her Lord has inspired to her
That day people come forward, each differently
To witness their deeds

So whoever does an atom's weight of good
Sees its consequence

And whoever does an atom's weight of harm
Sees its consequence (Koran 99:1-8)

History has witnessed man's constant condemnation of that which he cannot explain:

"And Moses answered and said: 'But, behold, they will not believe me, nor hearken unto my voice; for they will say: The LORD hath not appeared unto thee.'" Exodus (4:1)
"Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience" Colossians 3:12

"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you..." John 13:34-35.