

A Lesbian Muslim and the “Unsurmountable Rift”

by Hugh Fitzgerald



The BBC lets Miriam, a “Muslim and a lesbian,” tell her tale [here](#). She hid her sexuality from her strict Muslim parents for years. When she eventually did come out to them, she found it impossible to translate “lesbian” into Punjabi or Urdu. She explains how the conversation put an end to her double life “playing the straight woman” but caused a rift so deep that her father disowned her.

“I always knew I was attracted to the same gender – as young as four or five, when I kissed my best friend in the cloakroom, I knew then...”

Miriam grew up in a traditional Muslim family in Bristol where her grandfather “ruled the roost”, with Islamic sermons*

and prayers five times a day.

Despite knowing from a young age she was gay, she knew telling her parents would cause a rift that might prove insurmountable. She went to great lengths to hide it but found an outlet in which to explore her sexuality by speaking to women in chat rooms.

It was only when she went to university that she built up the courage to meet other women in person, travelling hundreds of miles so she wouldn't be seen by anyone she knew.

"I went as far as Manchester or Hartlepool, as long as it was a minimum of two hours away.

"I was absolutely [terrified] of having a relationship with someone in the same city as me. These scenarios used to play through my mind – what if someone sees me at the station?"

Fearful as she was of being caught out, these relationships gave Miriam freedom.

"I made sure that my girlfriends didn't visibly mark me, so I didn't come home with [love bites] on my neck. But while I was there, it was thrilling – I thought, 'Oh my god, I'm doing this, I'm having a sexual experience with another woman, this is amazing'...

Under the guise of friendship, Miriam did, on one occasion, take her lover home to her parents' house in Bristol.

"She was Muslim – if it was anyone else but her, it would have been difficult. But because she looked Asian it was easier [to explain her presence] than [bringing home] a white girlfriend. She had the cultural and religious understanding – she knew how to behave...

At 21, Miriam and her then partner got engaged. She knew she wanted to tell her mum about this "massive thing" but knew it would cause pain.

“Her words were that she never thought any child of hers could bring her as much shame as I did. And since then it’s very much been about religion. She’d reply, ‘God made man and woman – if you look at any verse in the Koran it’s never husband and husband or wife and wife’.

“It resonated with me, because I realised how much she was in a bubble – for her to not even [know] about homosexuality. But her overarching love for her daughter fights with her culture. She worries about me because she believes the life I’m living is a sin. I can tell when I look at her face that she’s hurting.”

Miriam said their relationship became very strained and for six months after, every time they spoke there was “shouting, screaming and crying”. She stopped going home as much and feels like their relationship has never recovered, but her mum agreed to keep it a secret. It was more than a decade before Miriam told her father. She and her current partner had recently got engaged and she decided the time was right to tell him.

“There’s no direct translation for gay, lesbian, bisexual in Punjabi or in Urdu that I know of, so I basically said ‘of that with you and mum’ – to liken it to a relationship.

“He said: ‘You know Islam, you’ve gone to the mosque, you’ve read the Koran, you know it’s a sin don’t you? As far as I’m concerned, I’m right, you’re wrong. What you’re doing is against Islam’.”

Miriam said her father presented her with a choice; give up her partner and return to the family home, or drop off her keys and never show her face again.

“He basically said he didn’t want anything to do with me and disowned me.”

The Muslim father is the absolute ruler of his family. He can “beat” his wife if she is disobedient. He can go into her – his “tilth” – as he will. He can divorce her merely by uttering the triple-talaq. He can take up to four wives, while his wife is limited to one husband. He is the ruler of his children, especially of his daughters, who can be punished severely, even killed, if they damage the family’s “honor” by their behavior. Homosexuality certainly damages that “honor” and Miriam can be thankful that her father is enlightened enough – or scared enough of British law – to send her into permanent exile from the family, rather than to inflict a more severe punishment, including an “honor killing.” He wants nothing more to do with her, and even forbade her mother from seeing her. He knows he is right and she is wrong, because it is in the Qur’an. He need not exercise any independent moral judgement, but need only follow what is commanded and what is forbidden, according to the Qur’an and Hadith. Allah Knows Best.

The prohibition of homosexuality comes from the story of the “people of Lot” – mentioned several times in the Qur’an – who practiced homosexuality. The details of their story differ according to the Qur’anic verse, but not the essentials: they practice homosexual acts, and therefore deserve condemnation and punishment. No precise punishment is given in the Qur’an, but in the Hadith Muhammad does prescribe punishments including, in one story, throwing them from a height. That explains why the Islamic State throws homosexuals off of rooftops and Iran hangs homosexuals from tall cranes.

In those nations that apply the Shariah most thoroughly, that is Saudi Arabia, Iran, Sudan, and Afghanistan, homosexuality is a serious offense that can bring imprisonment, corporal punishment (100s of lashes), or even the death penalty.

“He [Miriam’s father] initially prevented her mother from seeing her, even though she still wanted to have contact. They have managed to see each other occasionally at her sister’s

house, but Miriam admits she has given up wanting to change how her mum feels...

As for her father, Miriam recently saw him at a family gathering with other relatives who don't know about her sexuality.

"I used that opportunity to be normal with him. When he was about to leave for work I went up to him and gave him a big hug. He was rigid, but I stayed there for an extra 10 seconds to have that extra contact because I bloody miss him.

"I could either do what he said on that day [and leave], or I could keep testing the waters and that's [what I'm going to do]."

In Islam, as in many Christian denominations and in Orthodox Judaism, homosexuality is seen as a sin. While there have been moves towards acceptance of homosexuality in some religions, Islam in the West has tended to stay with the Orthodox view.

The writer of this BBC piece – who is not Miriam – is subtly attempting to make us believe that the particular cruel treatment of homosexuals in Islam is no different from what one could find in “many Christian denominations” and in “Orthodox Judaism.” This is flatly untrue. The treatment of homosexuals is much harsher in Islam. What Christian or Jewish sect punishes homosexuals with being flogged hundreds of times, or being given prison sentences, or even being executed? He does admit that there has been a change in attitudes toward homosexuality in Christianity and Orthodox Judaism, which “moves toward acceptance,” while in Islam nothing has changed. But he does not say what is most important, which is that Islam cannot change, because the Qur'an's text is immutable, and the judgement as to the “authenticity” of a particular hadith cannot be modified. The hadiths in which homosexuality is condemned and punishments

set out have long been deemed “authentic.”

Some “progressive” Muslims have tried to suggest that while male homosexuality is condemned in Islam, lesbianism is not. There is no textual authority for that, nor do the Qur’anic commentators accept such a view. Dr. Taha Jaber Al-`Alwani, President of the Graduate School of Islamic and Social Sciences and President of the Fiqh Council, states:

The scholars of this Ummah are in agreement – based on what has been revealed in the Qur’an and what has been authenticated in the Prophetic Tradition (Sunnah)- on prohibiting both behaviors (gayness and lesbianism) because in each of two actions there is an assault on the humanity of a person, destruction of the family and a clash with aims of the Lawgiver, one of which is the establishment of sexual instincts between males and females so as to encourage the institution of marriage.

Why does the BBC author claim that Islam “has tended to stay with the Orthodox[!] view,” which only confuses since he has just referred to “Orthodox Judaism”? The implied existence of “Orthodox Islam” that punishes acts of homosexuality or cross-dressing with punishments ranging from fines, floggings, to life in prison, torture, and death, may make the unwary think there is an un-Orthodox strain of Islam that rejects such punishments. There are Muslims who reject such punishments, but Islam itself does not.

We know that ISIS flings homosexuals from rooftops, while in Iran they are hung from cranes. In Saudi Arabia acts of homosexuality or cross-dressing can be punished in a wide variety of ways, ranging from fines, floggings, to life in prison, torture, and death, depending both on the details of the crime, and on the social position of the offender. Ordinarily Saudis of the upper class, especially those of the ruling family, receive much lighter punishments while

foreigners, e.g. Yemenis, Somalis, Pakistanis – have in recent years received the death penalty for the same crimes. In Afghanistan, the Pashtun culture sanctions relations between men and young boys aged 9 to 15, whom the men use unashamedly for sex; these men are called “bacha baz” or “boy players.” Yet these men do not consider themselves homosexuals, and are not punished for such behavior. “Real” homosexuals – that is, men with men, or women with women, do live in fear of severe punishment, especially, but not only, by the Taliban.

Miriam and her partner, who is white British, hope to marry in 2020. She plans to wear traditional dress for part of it and there “may be a few Asian tunes”. But the rest will be “as gay as gay can be” – with a drag act as compere and DJ.

In the meantime, the 35-year-old is focusing her efforts on a group she has founded that she hopes will become “a safe space” for Muslim LGBT+ people to meet without fear of discrimination.

If Miriam can openly celebrate her lesbian wedding, and if she can create a “safe space” for Muslim LGBT people, that is only because she lives in the West, and is the beneficiary of the West’s tolerance, a tolerance impossible in any Muslim country.

“I think Islam itself is a very closed off religion. If you look at some older members of the community, they are living in the 8th Century, not the 21st. But it is possible to be Muslim and gay. I genuinely believe that although I had a girlfriend earlier in life, I wasn’t out to myself. I feel not just stronger now after having those experiences, but more accepting of myself.”

Only “some older members”? It is not a question of age – all Muslims who take Islam to heart are in some sense “living in the 8th (or, more accurately, 7th) century.” They accept as

immutable the mores of 7th century Arabia. And it is "possible to be Muslim and gay" safely only if you live in the tolerant West, protected by its laws, and even then you may have reason to worry. It is not possible to be "Muslim and gay" with any such sense of security if you live in a Muslim country, especially one that follows the Sharia, such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, and the Sudan. Nor is it possible to be "Muslim and gay," that is "Muslim and gay" without fear, if your relatives regard your behavior as bringing shame to the family, and decide you must be punished. In Miriam's case, the family's cutting off all contact with her was the punishment that Miriam's soft-hearted father prescribed), but for some Muslims, her behavior could have led to much, much worse.

Miriam's story reveals the great anxiety that Muslim homosexuals feel even in the West. Her own story is comparatively mild; she successfully conducted her affairs, and hid her proclivities for many years. And her father, learning of her leanings, cut off the family's contact with her, but neither he nor any other male relative tried to punish her physically for bringing dishonor to the family. She was protected, above all, because she lived in Bristol rather than Baghdad. The British government safeguarded her.

Islamic texts cannot be changed. Homosexuality is a sin, according to several Qur'anic passages. Homosexuals are to be severely punished, as Muhammad makes clear in the hadith. But even if the ideology of Islam cannot be changed, Believers can be brought to the point of informal tolerance of homosexuality, including a refusal to enforce the punishments Islam mandates or, indeed, any punishment at all.. Not all Believers, fortunately, follow the Islamic commands to wage violent Jihad and to strike terror in the hearts of Infidels. The same can happen with the treatment of Muslim homosexuals. Let a kind of convivencia be implemented, first in the West where our laws protect Muslims like Miriam, and then, by slow degrees, in Muslim countries where, not because of, but

despite. the explicit teachings of Islam, a modus vivendi which tolerates homosexuals may eventually be created.

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