



Though the Qu'ran proscribes male-male sex, a substantial literature celebrating the beauty of young males developed in Islamic lands. In this sixteenth-century Persian illustration, a youth is courted by two male suitors.

## Islam

by Stephen O. Murray

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Islam is the third Abrahamic world religion, annexing Moses and Jesus, founders of the previous two, as prophets, but believing that the final and complete revelation of divine will for humankind was dictated to Muhammed during the seventh century C. E.

The core beliefs of Islam are that there is one and only god (Allah) and that Muhammed conveyed the words of Allah in writing the *Qu'ran* (*Koran* in older spelling). The *Qu'ran* details proper conduct and the divine plan for human society to which every believer (Muslim) must submit ("Islam" is Arabic for "submit").

The text of the *Qu'ran* was supplemented by sayings attributed to the Prophet, the *hadith* ("traditions"). Acceptance of particular *hadith* vary, as do interpretations of the *Qu'ran* by those implementing it as law (*sharia*).

Despite important regularities across both time and space, there are multiple Islamic societies, and a major schism that occurred while followers who had known and heard the Prophet were still alive continues (between Sunni and Shi'a faiths).

Since Islam lacks anything like the papacy's centralization of authority over definition of God's will and sacred book, various interpretations co-exist. Away from the Sunni/Shi'a borders, however, most Muslims have believed that there is a singular dar-al-Islam (abode of Islam) with shared interpretations and moral/social arrangements.

There is unanimity about the obligation to marry and procreate. Sexual pleasure is a good thing that Muslim men are entitled to enjoy (from their lawful female partners, up to four wives at a time). Female sexual desire is generally regarded as dangerous. Thus, in most Islamic societies females have been and are secluded and supervised to the extent that husbands and fathers have been able to afford to do so.

### Attitudes toward Same-Sex Sexual Relations

Adultery is a very serious offense (although penalties for it vary), and sex with a person of the same sex (*liwat*) is regarded by many as an aggravated kind of adultery (that is, sex with an illicit partner). For a Muslim male to be penetrated is widely seen as constituting a revolt against the divine order, which established two complementary sexes. Penetrating a non-Muslim male has generally been shrugged off, though not regarded as entirely licit. (The poet Abu Nuwas proclaimed it a "duty" to make non-believer males submit to penetration by a believer, a view also reported among some contemporary Palestinians.)

The *Qu'ran* 4.16 proscribes sex between two Muslim males and orders both to be punished, though mandating lenience if they repent and cease such sin. As Qu'ranic punishments go, this is lenient (contrast, for instance, the hundred lashes for fornication and death for adultery).

However, the story of the destruction of Sodom, interpreted as divine punishment for males seeking to rape

male guests, is alluded to seven times within the Qu'ran (7:80-84, 11:77-83, 22:43, 16:165-75, 26:165-75, 27:56-59, 29:27-33). Although it was Lot who went so far in trying to protect the visitors that he offered his daughters to fellow inhabitants of Sodom, his name has been taken (*luti*--Lot's people) as the most common term for those engaging in male-male sex.

There are *hadith* that record Muhammed's being amused by transvestite males (*mukhannath*) and permitting them freely to visit his wives when they were not veiled, and others showing him appreciating the beauty of young males--but not acting upon desire for them. The paradise promised in the *Qu'ran* 56:17-18 has beautiful male attendants (*hourī*) as well as female ones, though their availability for sex is not specified.

Hadith decrying "abomination" are more frequent than those exhibiting tolerance or appreciation of sexual or gender nonconformity. In one, male-male sex makes the throne of God tremble and deserves a rain of stones. Another reports Mohammed's father-in-law having a *luti* burned alive.

The Hanbalite school of jurists have recommended and ordered stoning of Muslim males witnessed by four adult Muslim males having sex with another Muslim male. (Up to eighty lashes is the punishment for slander, that is, accusation of sodomy not supported by three other eyewitnesses or by repeated confessions.) In contrast, the Hanafite school has taken the *hadith* that "Muslim blood can only be spilled because of adultery, apostasy, or homicide" to exclude capital punishment of homosexual relations.

An extensive literature celebrating the beauty of young males developed in Arabic, Persian, Turkish, Urdu, and other languages. The beautiful young male may be a metaphor for the divine in much of this, though the poems decrying the evasiveness and fickleness of beloved male youth strains such explaining away.

### **The Will Not to Know that Homosexual Relations Occur**

Although lacking religious legitimation, it has generally been the case in Islamic societies that, as long as the obligations to extend the family (through marriage and procreation) and to support it are met, and as long as a man is discreet, tolerance is extended to those who practice same-sex sexual relations.

The requirement of four reputable adult eyewitnesses in order to prosecute acts of same-sex sodomy is rarely met, and death penalties are consequently a fairly remote threat. The implicit accommodation to males enjoying love and sex with boys, transgendered males, and infidel males depends upon a widespread and enduring pattern of collective denial in which the condition for pursuing either age-stratified or gender-defined homosexuality is that the behavior never be publicly acknowledged. That is, there is a strong will not to know what fathers, husbands, and brothers do, as long as they fulfill their familial duties.

### **Female Sexuality**

What some see as Islam's being "sex-positive" does not extend to females. Sexual relations between women within harems or in female bathhouses (*hamam*) has been more supposed than observed. There is nothing about female-female sexual relations in the *Qu'ran*. Later mentions of educated women choosing not to submit to males and seducing attractive young females exist, but are not numerous. Some instances of husbands shrugging off information about wives' dalliances with other women also exist.

Women have only recently become visible at all in literature about Islamic societies. Whatever woman-woman sexuality occurs remains invisible, as in media from within Islamic societies. Representation even of married heterosexual conduct is heavily censored in current Islamic states. Published ethnographic literature on "lesbians" in Islamic societies is also non-existent, although there is one article (by Unni Wikan) on a transgendered role, the *khanith* of Oman.

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**Stephen O. Murray** earned a Ph.D. in sociology from the University of Toronto. Since completing a postdoctoral stint in anthropology at the University of California, Berkeley, he has worked in public health. His books include *American Gay*, *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands*, and *Homosexualities*.