

Unspeakable Love: Gay and Lesbian Life in the Middle East

by Brian Whitaker, Saqi Books, 2006, 264 pp.

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Fifty years ago, Muslims, Christians and Jews generally agreed that homosexuality was evil. While one could not say that Judaism and Christianity as a whole have come to terms with it, major bodies of opinion in these faiths have since moved forward and adopted a more tolerant approach to homosexuality. This is not the case in contemporary Islam, where, broadly speaking, there is no real debate on issues of sexuality.

Far from the essentialist discourse, often tinged with racism, that seeks to explain this difference away by theories on the 'true nature' of Islam, or by 'clash-of-civilisations' talk, 'Unspeakable Love' locates it as a political problem, and reminds us that there is not 'one' Islam, but many. Let's also remember the considerable distance that exists between the founding scriptures of any religion, the laws it derives from them, and the individual religious practices of its believers. Besides, a great variety of social, cultural and historical factors coexist within the Muslim world, from Morocco to Indonesia. This variety produces multiple ways to conceive and to live Islam.

In matters of sexuality, the Middle East has not always been as intolerant as it appears now. Indeed the idea of a licentious, depraved 'West' held by many Arabs today mirrors the view that many Europeans had of the Middle East in the nineteenth century and earlier (p. 66). The present intensification of puritan, rigorist tendencies in the Islamic and Arab world is, writes Whitaker, a product of the particular dynamic that colours the cultural relations between the East and the West, and more particularly, a reaction against what is sometimes perceived as contemporary imperialism. In other words, the institutionalised homophobia that has developed in the Muslim world is not a religious or a cultural issue, but is first and foremost a political problem of which culture and religion are contingent factors.

Attitudes towards homosexuality in the Middle East have become entangled in international politics, and claiming that homosexuality is anti-Islamic, or against the Arab 'nature,' has become a way to oppose Western policies. Reactionary

attitudes against the 'West' make some Islamic scholars and secular Arab leaders see gay rights, or human rights in general, as an import of the West, imposed on them by imperialist forces. And so 'Islam' and 'Arab identity' are used as a means to an end that is essentially political.

Western scholars, political commentators and gay rights campaigners who push an essentialist vision of Islam, or of Arab culture, as inherently homophobic, rely on claims and assumptions that they share with the fundamentalists who use cultural and religious heritage as a justification for archaic, and sometimes violent, practices that cannot be justified by rational means. One of these practices is the castigation of homosexuals. Whitaker sees social attitudes, not Islam, as the main obstacle to sexual rights. He gives British gay rights activist Peter Tatchell as an example of such campaigners. Unspeakable Love quotes Tatchell as claiming that 'Islamic Law [...] demands the death penalty for both lesbian and gay sex' (p. 121). Declaring that 'Islam' prescribes death for homosexuals is both simplistic and misleading, but Whitaker finds that religious conservatives and Western gay rights campaigners like to claim that it does, each for their own reasons. Both sides acknowledge 'one' Islam, and both sides agree on its violently intolerant nature. Gay Muslim organisation IMAAN stated that while criticizing particular Islamic public figures – such as Imam al-Qaradawi – for their views on homosexuality was perfectly acceptable, Peter Tatchell's organisation OutRage!'s 'continuous misrepresent[ation of] Islam' [1] was particularly unhelpful.

Whitaker proposes a more constructive way of addressing the problem, which is to place the focus of attention on the similarities between the West and the Arab-Islamic culture rather than on their differences. The homophobic rhetoric used in the Arab world today, which claims that homosexuality will lead to the collapse of civilisation and to social decay, is little different from the rhetoric used in Western countries until not so long ago (and sometimes still used).

Acceptance of homosexuality in the West is only recent. It is also partial, and potentially reversible. Contemporary Arab attitudes to homosexuality were commonplace in the West fifty years ago, and those who single out Islam as being uniquely and essentially reactionary might do well to remember that Britain repressed homosexuality in the name of religion and social order over many centuries. Whitaker writes that Britain's war against same-sex sexual activity 'certainly equalled, and in its scale probably outstripped, anything that happens in Arab countries today' (p. 114). The death penalty for buggery was formally

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abolished in Britain as late as 1861, and homosexual acts between men continued to be a criminal offence for another century.

In 1953, David Maxwell-Fyfe, then Home Secretary, told the British parliament that 'homosexuals' were 'exhibitionists and proselytisers' as well as a 'danger to others, especially the young' (p. 115). During his term, the number of prosecutions for homosexuality grew to four times what it had been in 1939. This crackdown, supported by the popular press, did not deter homosexual activity but helped to highlight the inconsistencies of the courts when passing sentences. During that period, the police routinely used illegal methods such as entrapment by 'agents provocateurs.' Those unlucky enough to get convicted were coerced into 'therapy' that could include electric shocks or hormone injections. British society has come a long way in terms of sexuality, and no one would argue that either policy or public opinion in the 1950s were essentially Western, or essentially Christian.

In the UK, the prosecution of many high-ranking homosexuals helped the process along, but in the Middle East, writes Whitaker, the present state of corruption makes such high-profile cases very unlikely: if a prominent Arab is arrested on the charge of homosexuality, he (as most often it is a he) will take advantage of the system of 'wasta' and get out of trouble through well-directed bribery.

Whitaker gives examples of various eccentric 'remedies' to homosexuality recommended by well-respected Islamic scholars and physicists. The ignorance they display would be risible if their effects were not so disastrous on many young lives. Some advocate home made aversion therapy (whenever they feel attracted to someone of their own sex, the patient should visualise images of hell, upon which the attraction will soon vanish), some recommend (for men) the cauterisation of the anus, as a result of which 'intercourse will fail.' The most common piece of advice given to 'confused' youth, though, is to marry as quickly as possible (to someone of the other sex). Once again, this is reminiscent of a discourse that is popular in some Jewish and Christian religious circles, not fifty years ago, but today.

Whitaker argues that the claim that Islam provides prescriptive rulings against homosexuality is a matter of interpretation. As with Jewish and Christian scriptures, the ways in which Muslim scholars interpret the Koran are shaped by prevailing social and cultural values. The vast majority of Muslims might agree with Khalid Duran's assertion that the Koran is 'very explicit in its condemnation of homosexuality' (p. 179), but the vast majority of Christians would have thought

the same about the Bible thirty or forty years ago, though many have probably changed their minds since. The story of Lot (the Bible's Lot) is the one most used piece of 'evidence' of the divine prohibition of homosexuality. Whitaker writes that, often, the story of Lot is reconstructed to embellish its sexual aspects, but that in reality, the Koran does not state that homosexuality is the most heinous crime, or that it was the specific reason for punishing the people of Lot (p. 191).

Thus what most probably started as a Jewish tale is being used, after interpretation, as a legal precedent that 'allows' *some* Islamic scholars to recommend stoning to death as an appropriate punishment for sodomy, on the grounds that God punished the people of Sodom by having stones raining on them from Heaven. But the story, as told in the Koran, is not delivered in prescriptive terms. Lot also offers his daughters to the mob. But nobody treats this part of the story as a divine prescription, an injunction to do such things today.

If such arguments take place within Judaism and Christianity, where they generate much heat, there is little space today for this type of debate in Islam. But changes in Christian and Jewish attitudes are part of a wider process. This process has its roots in European and American history, from the campaigns against slavery in the eighteenth century to the battles for civil rights, racial equality and women's rights in the twentieth century.

Whitaker argues that this process is now taking place in certain areas of the Middle East, as a result of increased social and cultural contacts with the West through the Internet, satellite television and travel. Egyptian and Lebanese youth, for example, are becoming more aware of their own sexuality. This phenomenon of cultural interaction and influence is seen by a certain kind of contemporary 'anti-imperialist' intelligentsia as a conspiracy against Arab 'authenticity.' Joseph Massad [2] writes that campaigners for gay rights have 'appropriated the US discourse on human rights in order to launch [their project] on an international scale' (p. 211). He even goes as far as noting that the International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA) 'was founded in 1978 at the height of the Carter administration's human rights campaign against the Soviet Union and Third World enemies.' As Whitaker notes, Massad's view of gay rights campaigners as interfering busybodies would be taken more seriously if gay and lesbian Muslims and Arabs were able to organise themselves as gays and lesbians in their own countries. As this is not the case, it has become a common practice for campaigns to be based abroad, with secret collaboration from people within the country.

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Even if most countries do legislate against homosexual acts, there are as many different 'Islamic' legal systems as there are Muslim countries. Saudi Arabia is the only state in the World that claims to apply Sharia law literally. Other Muslim states count Sharia as a 'source' (to varying degrees) of their legal system. What is common to most of these countries is that their authorities keep prosecutions at a moderate level, balanced as follows: enough to appease moral outrage, but little enough to perpetuate the myth that homosexuality is very uncommon in the Arab or Muslim world. Whitaker points out that this restraint makes it harder for activists to campaign for the abolition of the laws against homosexuality: the defects in the law become more visible with the number of prosecutions. Indeed in Britain, David Maxwell-Fyfe's zeal in stamping out homosexuality brought matters to a head and began the process that led to legalisation.

The result of this is a prolonged status quo in which gay men can glean some freedom here and there, but where declaring one's homosexuality remains out of the question. Whitaker has met and interviewed several men, and a couple of women, who had poignant stories to tell of beatings, imposed marriages, familial rejection and forced emigration, all caused by the discovery of their homosexuality by their families or their friends, sometimes by the police. He tells these stories very well, and the quality of Whitaker's journalism is really the heart of the book.

The aspect of 'Unspeakable Love' that readers might find disappointing is the little attention to, and perhaps the lack of interest he shows in, the plight of Arab and Muslim lesbians. This is noticeable at first in the very small number of women interviewed by Whitaker, in comparison to the number of men. This is perhaps not deliberate. It may be that lesbians are (even) less visible in the Middle East than gay men, or it might be that his contacts happened to be men rather than women. But there may be more to it than that. In a chapter called 'A Question of Honour,' Whitaker presents the unrest and confusion experienced by Arab or Muslim families who discover their child's homosexuality. The first sentence of the book reads '[f]aced with ... a son who shows no interest in girls' (p. 17). The reality of the situation he describes applies to children of both sexes, so it is not clear why he chooses to ignore daughters, and families 'faced with a daughter who...'

Whitaker relies on just one interview to state confidently (p. 23) that having a lesbian daughter is less problematic for an Arab family than having a gay son. Laila, the Egyptian lesbian in her twenties who suggests this, gives two reasons for this state of affairs. First, the Middle East is so heavily male-orientated that all family

hopes are pinned on male children – boys are under more pressure than girls to live up to parental aspirations. Second, ‘lesbian inclinations remove some of a family’s usual worries,’ a reference to the loss of a daughter’s virginity.

Not only do I find these reasons dubious, they also seem to me to be mutually exclusive. The second reason is a lightly worded version of the widely accepted idea in the Arab-Islamic world that a family’s honour is reflected by its women’s sexual behaviour. Virtually all victims of honour killings are women. The idea that boys come under more pressure than girls to conform to parental aspirations is wrong, as is exemplified by many of the stories presented by Whitaker which show that if gay men enjoy less freedom than their straight counterparts, they are still freer than straight women, let alone lesbians. And vice versa: if the first reason was valid (that all parental aspirations lie with boys), why would a girl’s virginity be so crucial?

Whitaker seems to find Laila’s poor logic powerful enough to make her theory his own, even though he writes that ‘Laila’s experience was not shared by Sahar,’ a Lebanese lesbian whose family was far from relaxed about her sexuality. The underlying idea here is that not being promiscuous is the least girls can do. The assumption is that sexual freedom is not as important for girls as it is for boys, and that the sacrifice that is asked of girls and women for the sake of their families’ ‘honour’ is so insignificant that it does not qualify as ‘parental pressure.’

Whitaker also remarks that lesbians in Egypt have been left alone, by and large and in comparison with gay men, by the authorities. But he does not make the link between this and the fact that they are mostly invisible: ‘there are no lesbian organisations, either for discussion or support. Heterosexuals and gay men have their pick-up points, [lesbians] don’t’ (p. 51). The only popular meeting place for lesbians has now been closed down. This hardly fits the idea that life is easier for lesbians, and that they have the luxury to be ‘left alone’ by the authorities. According to Iman al-Ghafari, of Tishreen University in Syria, Arabs see lesbianism as a ‘temporary substitute’ (p. 52) for the love of men. Whitaker uses this quote to explain the accommodating attitude enjoyed, as he claims, by Arab lesbians: as a ‘temporary substitute’ for the love of men, lesbians are not perceived as a threat to the dominant heterosexual system. Whitaker adds that lesbianism is, for many Arab married women, a way to add spice to their sex life. While he is very well aware that gay men do not choose their sexual orientation, and is sensitive to the issues and problems that they face in Arab societies, he seems to see Arab lesbianism as an activity rather than an identity.

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Seeking an explanation for the fact that Arab lesbianism as an 'identity' is invisible in the Middle East, he finds al-Ghafari's quote: 'the feminist discourse that turns lesbianism into a political choice is not liberating. Instead, it puts ['inborn'] lesbians in a troublesome position where they have to [...] fulfil the desires and fantasies of some heterosexual feminists at the expense of their true lesbian desires' (p. 86). It is the 'feminist' sort of lesbians who are problematic, who impose a political, 'chosen' brand of lesbianism on 'inborn' lesbians. In other words, the 'inborn' lesbians are innocent: they are not politicised, they do not question the supremacy of heterosexuality, and if they are being oppressed and denied a cultural and sexual identity, other women are to blame. Singled out for responsibility are the 'feminist' lesbians, the ones whose desire 'does not stem from the body' (p. 87) but from their politics.

In Saudi Arabia, the vibrant, if clandestine, gay life described by Whitaker is out of bounds for lesbians. The truth is that while gay men are free to go out, meet their friends and party (more so than heterosexual men, according to one of his interviewees, p. 56), women are not, regardless of their sexual orientation. The account of Riyadh's 'gay café' with its stream of cappuccinos, French desserts and Mercedes-driving teenage boys, show that in Saudi Arabia, the Sharia-applying state, as in the rest of the world, freedom can be bought by the males who can afford it.

This is a weakness of the book: the title is misleading when it claims to present a picture of the lives of gays and lesbians in the Middle East. In reality, it contains very little material on, and even less cogent analysis of, lesbian life and identities in the Arab-Islamic world. While Whitaker understands and acknowledges male homosexuality in all its dimensions (social, sexual, affective, cultural, economic), he accepts the reduction of lesbianism to its purely sexual dimension, or its purely affective dimension, by the experts he interviews. The traditional sexist attitude that subordinates women to men runs throughout the watermark of the book, including its note on terminology (p. 15), which states that while as an adjective and a substantive, 'lesbian' only applies to women, 'gay' (adjective) applies to men, but also to men and women collectively.

Whitaker, to a certain extent, accepts the traditional hierarchy between the sexes, together with the cultural, political, economic, and even the lexical supremacy of the male. His book, in spite of its title, does not really acknowledge or clarify specific lesbian claims. Lesbians are 'neutral-ised' to fit into the male universal.

If the great appeal of this book lies in Whitaker's reportage, it is also valuable politically because it challenges the current climate of political relativism that wants to see homophobia as a religious or cultural issue rather than a political one. Whitaker argues for the universality of sexual rights and for liberty in the Middle East, and against the fashion of apologising for its illiberal climate. Whether apologists for illiberal policy in the Arab world are cultural relativists who make this policy 'essential,' or whether they claim that it is entirely a product of colonialism, Whitaker critiques both. He has met men and women in the Middle East who aspire to liberty and who are no less Arab or Muslim for it.

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Notes

- [1] 'We disagree with Al-Qaradawi's views on homosexuality, which mirror views of Jewish and Christian leaders, but we believe that singling out Islam as being uniquely reactionary encourages Islamophobia and divides the Muslim and Lesbian and Gay communities. We believe it is correct for institutions such as the Foreign Office to work with all religious leaders on issues for those communities. What is not helpful in the fight against homophobia and Islamophobia, oppressions that equally victimise LGBT Muslims, is having the media and groups such as GALHA, Outrage and others continuously misrepresenting Islam.' (Source: Questions To The Mayor, Report Number: 4. Report to: London Assembly. Date: 14/09/05. Report of: Director of Secretariat).
- [2] Joseph Massad is the Columbia professor recently involved in a classroom scandal over allegations of anti-Semitism. He is responsible for a number of remarkable statements on the history of the Middle East, recent examples of which include: 'Exodus tells the story of the Zionist hijacking of a ship from Cyprus to Palestine by a Zionist Haganah commander.' (Massad's plot synopsis of *Exodus*, Preminger's 1960 movie about the shipload of Holocaust refugees desperately trying to reach Palestine.)