



Homosexuality, Islam and the West

Klassieke masterproef – 20 718 woorden

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Datum en jaar van indiening

12/08/2020

Masterproef voorgelegd tot het behalen van de graad van Master in Gender en Diversiteit

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Prefix

Due to the coronavirus pandemic, I had to change the methodological format of the thesis from a qualitative research to a literature study. Therefore I also had to redirect my research slightly: while in the beginning I was going to focus on the lived experiences of Muslim gay and lesbian subjects, due to the unexpected changes I decided to focus more on theoretical and descriptive aspects of the connections between homosexuality, Islam and the West based on previous research done by other scholars.

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Abstract

Homosexuality and Islam have a very complex and dynamic relationship. Muslims' perception of homosexuality may range from very acceptant to very dismissive. Their perception of homosexuality and interpretation of Islamic religion are influenced by a myriad of factors internal and external to their communities, societies and cultures. By taking into consideration political, social and historical contexts and by exposing the legacy of Western colonialism and imperialism on the sexual and gender order of Muslim societies and communities, this paper seeks to debunk the Western myth that Islam is intrinsically homophobic and that the only way for Muslims to become acceptant of homosexuality is through adopting a Western secular and modern framework.

Abstract

Homoseksualiteit en Islam hebben een heel complexe en dynamieke relatie. De perceptie van Moslims over homoseksualiteit kan reiken van heel aanvaardend tot heel afwijzend. Hun perceptie van homoseksualiteit en interpretatie van Islamitische religie worden beïnvloed door een veelvoud van factoren intern en extern van hun gemeenschappen, samenlevingen en culturen. Door de politieke, sociale en historische contexten te overwegen en door de nalatenschap van Westerse kolonialisme en imperialisme op de seksuele en genderorde van Moslim gemeenschappen en samenlevingen bloot te stellen, deze paper tracht de Westerse mythe dat Islam onmiskenbaar homofobisch is te ontmaskeren en toont dat er andere manieren zijn om aanvaardend te zijn over homoseksualiteit dan een Westerse seculiere en moderne kader aan te nemen.

Introduction

In recent years, Islam and Muslims have been given a bad reputation in the West for various reasons. Recent waves of terrorist attacks in the name of Islam have legitimated aggressive policies from Western countries against Muslims both in Muslim-majority countries and in the West, as in War on Terror campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan. These terrorist attacks have also created the image of Islam and Muslims as being essentially aggressive and irrational, which has also led to increasing Islamophobia in the West and the rise of anti-Islamic right-wing populist parties all across Europe and North-America. Islam and Muslims have also long had the reputation in the West as being intrinsically traditional, conservative and authoritarian. The stereotypical image of Muslims as being homophobic and sexist has also gained even more popularity, especially during the ongoing War on Terror. These prejudices and stereotypes have been reinforced and sustained by the media and politicians alike. Prejudices and stereotypes of Muslims and Islam have had a long history in the West, and have long legitimated civilizational discourses which construct the ‘Muslim world’ as essentially backwards and inferior and in the need of progress and ‘civilization’, which must be provided by the culturally superior ‘West’. These civilizational discourses have thus legitimated Western imperial and colonial incursions in Muslim societies – and still continue to do so in the form of Western neo-imperialist interventions, invasions and coercions. In the West, Muslim minorities have also suffered the consequences of these civilizational discourses through assimilationist and exclusionary anti-Muslim policies. Most alarmingly, some feminist and gay activists have joined these civilizational discourses, as they believe that Muslims must abandon their own ‘sexist’ and ‘homophobic’ cultures and must adopt Western notions of modernity if they want to liberate themselves from their ‘oppressive’ culture. These gay and feminist activists have thus become complicit with nationalist and imperial Western projects which serve to assimilate and exclude Muslim subjects all around the world. Muslim women and LGBTQ+ in the West and in Muslim-majority countries – who are the subjects in need of ‘saving’ as seen through the Western civilizational lens – are also negatively affected by these civilizational discourses and policies, as their intersectional position is not taken into full consideration and see themselves then caught between Islamophobia and homophobia.

In this paper, the Western myth of an irrational, backwards and patriarchal ‘Muslim world’ and a superior, civilized and progressive West is debunked by taking into consideration the complexity and fluidity of Muslim cultures and societies and by exposing the (neo-)colonial and imperial connections between the West and East, which has impacted the gender and sexual order of Muslim societies in several ways. By examining how Islam and Muslims connect with homosexuality, there is an appreciation of how political, social and historical contexts and factors play a role in how Muslims view homosexuality and how queer Muslims experience multiple intersectional discriminations. This paper is a literature study that encompasses many theories and concepts which have examined the intersections between patriarchy, heterosexism and colonialism.

Orientalism in contemporary debates

Revisiting the ‘clash of civilizations’ discourse

Following recent terrorist attacks from fundamentalist Muslims in Europe and in North America and the ongoing global War on Terror, there has been a renewed discussion on the compatibility of Muslims and the West and a steady surge in Islamophobia. Leaders from all over the West who have condemned these attacks have repeatedly called the public to protect “our Western norms and values” amidst the perceived growing fears of Islamic terrorism. Right-wing populism and nationalism have gained considerable popularity in most Western countries and leaders and politicians such as Donald Trump, Viktor Orbán, Theo Francken and Marine Le Pen have constantly reminded the public of the so-called incompatibility between Islam and the West and have appealed to assimilationist and exclusionary discourses and policies of migrants and Muslims. Right-wing anti-Islamic populist and nationalist parties have only gained votes in many – if not most – Western countries in the most recent national elections and in countries. Bans on veiled clothing, more scrutinized control of Muslim populations and migrants and xenophobe questioning of multicultural societies have been among the many debates and discourses concerning the place of Islam and Muslims in the West. More tightly controlled or even the closing of borders and a more restrictive and assimilationist approach to migrants and asylum-seekers have prevailed as policies of national security and internal affairs across Europe and North America. A renewed campaign on the War on Terror on a global scale has reappeared after the terrorist attacks across the West, with Western-led interventions and military operations reaching countries such as Syria, Yemen, Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan. This has been the dominating political landscape surrounding the West and the Islamic world in the last couple of decades. As legitimation for these aggressive and assimilationist internal and foreign Western policies is the positioning of Muslim culture and values as antithetical to those of the West (Kaya & Tecmen, 2019). Although this trend has been going on for centuries already, this idea of incompatible and rival cultures has been given renewed consideration after the Cold War, most succinctly characterized by Huntington’s argument of ‘clash of civilizations’.

Huntington’s theory on the ‘clash of civilizations’ states that culture would be the new source of conflict in the post-Cold War era, signaling the end of ideology or economy as the fundamental source of conflict in the new emerging world political order. These cultures would be represented by major conflicting civilizations which he defines as Western, Confucian, Japanese, Islamic, Hindu, Slavic-Orthodox, Latin American and possibly African, all defined by their distinct history, language, culture, tradition and religion. Religion is considered to be the most important component of civilizations according to Huntington, as it results in great differences between the relationship of God and man, individual and group and citizen and state (Huntington, 1993). In this context, the cultures of the perceived civilizations are then regarded as mutually exclusive, homogeneous and static and several generalizations are made about them. No consideration whatsoever is given to the mutual influences and interaction of cultures between and within these so-called civilizations and the interaction and transposition of modernity between metropolises and colonies in the context of Western colonial and imperial history throughout the globe (Rahman, 2010). Modernity and

modern democracies are then considered to be coherent and exclusively Western phenomena, and according to Huntington, “Western concepts differ fundamentally from those prevalent in other civilizations. Western ideas of individualism, liberalism, constitutionalism, human rights, equality, liberty, the rule of law, democracy, free markets, the separation of church and state, often have little resonance in Islamic, Confucian, Japanese, Hindu, Buddhist or Orthodox cultures” (Huntington, 1993: 40). One of such generalizations of culture was also made about the so-called Islamic civilization and Muslim culture, which is regarded by Huntington to be one of the two major challenger civilizations to the dominant West, together with the Sinic civilization. Because of the centrality of religion in Huntington’s argument of the clash between these civilizations, this clash is inevitably and deeply embedded in two different cultural systems: the Western cultural system which separates church and state and the cultural system of the rest which pulls them together. Islam and Islamic countries in this context are regarded homogeneously as conservative, fundamentalist, undemocratic, theocratic and violent as opposed to the progressive, secular and democratic West (Huntington, 1993).

Huntington’s argument on the ‘clash of civilizations’ was then written in a period of significant changes in the world political system as the Soviet Union disbanded, which was the only superpower which could possibly rival the West at that time. As communism as a system failed to prove being the alternative system to the Western capitalist system, the West – and more specifically the United States of America – was then considered to be the sole remaining superpower, losing its former political enemy Other (Turner, 2002). Because of the consequently unrivalled economic, military and political power of the West, the rest of the world must position itself vis-à-vis Western power and values according to Huntington, in a global conflict between the West and the Rest: it must either isolate itself from the West, join the West or balance the west through modernization and cooperation with other non-Western powers (Huntington, 1993). In particular, Islam and Islamic fundamentalism is then constructed as the unambiguous enemy of Western civilization, becoming the new political enemy Other (Tuastad, 2003). Huntington draws on scholarship from the Islamic world, in particular from the conservative historian Bernard Lewis, who states that Muslim resentment against the West is a reaction to the historical undermining of Islamic cultures in modernity (Rahman, 2010). He even quotes Lewis, by claiming that Muslim hostility “is no less than a clash of civilisations – the perhaps *irrational* but surely historic reactions of an ancient rival against our Judeo-Christian heritage, our secular present, and the worldwide expansion of both” (Huntington, 2003: 32; emphasis added). Another intellectual who theorized about how the world would look like after the Cold War was Huntington’s former student Francis Fukuyama (1989), who also wrote an influential paper on post-Cold War world politics called *The End of History and the Last Man*. In this paper, Fukuyama argues that the world had reached ‘the end of history’ in a Hegelian sense and that the Western model of modern liberal democracy, human rights and capitalist free market has become the only ideological alternative for all nations of the world in the post-Cold War era world. Fukuyama advocates for the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government (Fukuyama, 1989). Together, these two very influential texts provide or have been used to provide moral and ideological superiority to the West and legitimize Western neo-imperialist

campaigns throughout the world. These texts have then been influential not only in the academic world but also in other areas such as the foreign policies of some Western countries. Currently, these neo-imperialist advances have been epitomized by the War on Terror in which the West propagates and imposes its liberal democratic model and free market capitalism in a belligerent and quasi-Messianic way throughout the Global South, and in particular the Middle East, with clear economic, political and geo-strategic interests at stake (Tuastad, 2003).

Orientalism and neo-Orientalism

Central to the discourse on the ‘clash of civilizations’ and the War on Terror on which it has been framed, is an Orientalist understanding of Islam and the Orient constructed as the Other which in turn also constructs the West as opposed to the Orient. In order to go deeper into this, we must refer to Orientalism as an analytical framework, which has been already thoroughly described decades ago in the influential book written by Edward Said (1978) *Orientalism*. According to Said, Orientalism is a “Western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient” (Said, 1978: 3). The ‘Orientalist’ as the actor in Orientalist discourse represents ‘the Orient’ (as constructed geographical space) and ‘the Orientals’ (as constructed objects of inquiry) in aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical and philological texts where ‘the Orientalist’ speaks for and represents ‘the Orient’ and ‘the Orientals’, effectively silencing them and rendering them unfit as free subjects of thought and action. Orientalism not only has a great reach in terms of geographical space as it constructs the Orient as comprising the Arabs, Turks and Indians, but also spans many eras and has as such also a great reach in terms of time. The motivation of ‘the West’ to know and represent ‘the Orient’ is inextricably bound to its desire to dominate and control it by making it epistemologically and ontologically distinct from itself (Said, 1978: 2). In Orientalist discourse, there is always an oppositional binary relationship (such as irrational/rational, civilized/barbaric) between ‘the East’ (which encompasses the Arabs and Muslims) and ‘the West’. In this oppositional binary relationship, ‘the Orient’ is always assigned an inferior position vis-à-vis ‘the West’. ‘The Orient’ is then constructed as backwards, irrational, exotic and authoritarian while ‘the West’ is constructed as civilized, rational, moral and democratic. These representations not only serve to render ‘the Orient’ as the ‘Other’ but also to represent ‘the West’ self-referentially, as the West is everything what the East is not. Orientalism is then a way of constructing and representing not only ‘the Orient’ but also ‘the West’ through an imperialist and civilizing discourse, with the ultimate goal of ‘the West’ dominating ‘the Orient’. Orientalist narratives thus not only create knowledge about the Orient but also the very reality it appears to describe. The Orient becomes the personification of the orientalist imaginary and becomes reduced and essentialized as the domain of the unchanging, irrational, despotic, sensual and violent. Essentially, if not exoticized, the Orient becomes a place to be feared, dominated and reformed by the West – it is a tool for imperial and colonial domination (Said, 1978).

Orientalist discourses have long legitimized Western colonial and imperialist expansion in the Orient for centuries. In particular the French and British empires have long relied on Orientalist discourses to dominate and colonize the Orient. However, the proclamation of

independence of Muslim and Arab countries has not meant the disappearance of Orientalist discourse nor the end of Western imperialism and interventionism in the region. The structure and ideology of Orientalism and orientalist-generated anxieties and stereotypes have endured and even intensified in modern and contemporary representations of Islam and Arabs, especially after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 in New York, United States (Altwaiji, 2014). Said (2003) has announced the advent of a ‘belligerent neo-Orientalism’ in contemporary western representations of the Orient, where heightened negative representations of Muslims and Arabs have been emerging especially in the domain of media, entertainment and public culture (Said, 2003: 4). Neo-orientalism is characterized by the same essential features as classic orientalism, relying on a binary oppositional logic and an assumption of moral and cultural superiority of the West over the oriental Other, but it differs from classic Orientalism in its discursive strategies and practices (al-Zo’by, 2015). Instead of focusing on the old thesis of ‘oriental despotism’ in which the political structures were considered as devoid of stable and representative political systems because of weak societies, neo-orientalism argues that the political paralysis and violence of Muslim societies lies in Islamic law and its cultural ethos, meaning that the psychological and social structures of these societies harbor deep hostility, resentment and resistance towards political authority and rationality – read: western democratic values and virtues. In other words, the political instability and violence that underpin most Muslim societies is now considered to be the result of ‘weak states’ unable to reform and rule ‘strong societies’ (Sadowski, 1993). Tuastad (2004) associates the emergence of neo-orientalism with the rise of the ‘new barbarism thesis’ in which the irrational violence, political backwardness and economic underdevelopment are explained as the products, expressions and traits of the local civilizational and cultural inferiority. This ‘new barbarism thesis’ thus delinks Western imperial legacy, current Western interventionism and local political and economic grievings from the violent political climate underpinning many Muslim societies and attributes this violence to the ‘violent and irrational’ local cultures – with Islamic religion as its most central component. This ‘cultural turn’ then generalizes and reduces Muslim cultures according to their presumed ‘essential’ characteristics and turns religion – as its most essential characteristic – into a political category for explaining local political and social processes (ibid.).

The end of the Cold War and the Gulf War in 1991 marked the emergence of neo-orientalist ideology in especially in media and popular representations of Islam. These events marked the drastic shift that shaped and framed the West’s new relation with the Islamic world and where interventionism on the basis of neo-liberal development and culture/’civilization’ began to emerge as a doctrine (Al-Zo’by, 2015). The end of the Cold War meant that the West lost its decade-long enemy other – that is to say communism – thus constructing Islam, and in particular fundamentalist Islam, as the unambiguous enemy of western civilization (Turner, 2002). This division between ‘friends and foes’ and its necessity in politics has a long tradition among conservative theorists, and in particular in Carl Schmitt’s philosophy, a prominent member of the Nazi party and notorious anti-communist. Schmitt (2008) posits that the political is designed in terms of a decisive struggle between friends and enemies so that authentic values can be protected and sustained. The enemy must be a real and concrete threat to the state and the state must then struggle against its enemy in order to preserve a moral

form of life and impose its ‘universal’ truth upon its (military) opponent (ibid.). With the fall of organized communism and the emergence of the ‘cultural turn’ and the ‘clash of civilizations’ thesis, culture –and in particular religion – and not ideology became the main political category to explain national and international political, social and economic processes and conflicts. It is in this light that the emergence of the ‘clash of civilizations’ thesis came to frame Islamic and Western civilization as inherently conflictual and opposed to each other because of the clash between irreconcilable values: progress versus backwardness, modernity versus stagnation, rationality versus irrationality. Islam then became not only a political and security obstacle to the West but also a cultural and civilizational one (Rahman, 2010). This discourse on the ‘clash of civilizations’ was first apparent in Bernard Lewis’ reductive appropriation of culture understood as religion, where he positioned Islam and ‘Islamic civilization’ as culturally inferior and irrationally hostile to the West’s superior democratic and modern values. It was later enlarged by Huntington in his clash of civilization thesis, where he states that Islam and Muslims are more predisposed to violence than other civilizations and are unchangeably incompatible with Western modern values. Instead, Muslims adhere to their own stagnating and flawed traditions, so that a conflict between Islam and the West becomes unavoidable. The West in its turn cannot export its values and beliefs as universal values into this region of the world. Both thinkers, providing intellectual and policy counsel to American foreign policy establishment, agree that Islam must be contained and be fought against, using force if necessary (Mamdani, 2005). The War on Terror has been framed on such terms, and its efforts to reassert American global hegemony through coercive and cultural means has shown how neo-orientalism goes hand in hand with neo-imperialist interests in the Middle East, not the least because of economic interests such as ensuring steady oil supply to the West (Altwaji, 2014).

Perhaps the most distinguishing feature of neo-orientalist ideology from its predecessor, classical Orientalism, is the mobilization of ‘native experts’ to authorize, facilitate and authenticate neo-orientalist ideology. As Behdad and Williams (2010) have stated in their description of neo-orientalism:

... whereas classical Orientalists were commonly male European savants, philologists, established writers and artists, neo-Orientalists tend to be ordinary Middle Eastern subjects whose self-proclaimed authenticity sanctions and authorizes their discourses. Contemporary neo-Orientalists are not, however, merely “native informants” or “comprador intellectuals” as Hamid Dabashi and others have suggested, but rather Middle Eastern women and men who use their native subjectivity and new-found agency in the West to render otherwise biased accounts of the region seemly more authoritative and objective (2010: 286)

Classical Orientalism relied on prejudiced outsider interpretations and descriptions of the Eastern world done mainly and exclusively by Western (male) scholars and artists, shaped by the cultural attitudes of European colonialism and imperialism in the 18th and 19th centuries. Whereas under classical Orientalism, Islam and Muslims suffered from symbolic annihilation through the authoritative and patronizing discourse of Western orientalist who spoke for and represented them, the use of ‘native experts’ in neo-orientalist ideology clearly complicates

the image. Under neo-orientalist mode of knowledge production, native representations of Islam and Muslims are widespread in popular western public discourses, but mainly as testimonials that reconfirm and disguise dominant orientalist ideological dogma. Figures such as Ayaan Hirsi Ali and Fouad Ajami and many others considered ‘native experts’ have performed this role. The authority that these neo-orientalist native experts have in Western representations of the East is construed and claimed not only through having lived in the Muslim world itself, but also by their legitimation of having a supposed authoritative knowledge of Muslim, Arab or Middle-Eastern people, culture and political situation because they are natives (Al-Zo’by, 2015). These so-called ‘good Muslims’ – read, pro-Western – as opposed to those ‘bad Muslims’ – read, anti-Western – have often negatively contributed to the discursive representations of Islam and Muslims. Even though what they proclaim may have some content of factual truths about the conditions of some Muslim societies, in effect they often dehistoricize, decontextualize and depoliticize the conditions that have produced the grievances and actions they condemn. These neo-orientalists also offer a continuation of the classical orientalist discourse, in which they use specific observations, experiences or knowledge to make a monolithic and totalizing account of Islam and Muslims based on a binary logic and based on the assumption of Western moral and cultural superiority over the Oriental other (Behdad & Williams, 2010). In neo-orientalist discourse, the ‘subaltern’ is thus no longer silent but is rather fully and publicly invited to ‘confess’ and make public Islam’s inherent ‘failures’, ‘pathologies’ and ‘horrors’ in a way that generalizes and essentializes Islam and Muslim culture and society, not taking into consideration the historical contexts and societal relations of power (Al-Zo’by, 2015).

Orientalist discourse and its ‘new barbarism thesis’ thus relies on the separation of center or core countries and periphery while the crisis of the center is projected onto the periphery. A deeply contradictory paradigm then emerges, where on the one side there is an extremely individualistic ethic and on the other side there are racist explanations for the causes of social inequality. Although colonialism and imperialism have officially ended, this new relationship between core and periphery mimic those of the imperial center and colonial periphery, as the construction of an external enemy defined as irrational and disordered is integral to define the unity of the core countries defined as rational and civilized (Tuastad, 2003). There are several problems with this neo-imperialist Western account of Islam and the periphery. The division between core and periphery renders current global ‘pathologies’ as non-systemic, thus masking the linkages and power relations between center and periphery and the consequences of Western hegemonic strategies. At the same time it renders the crises of the periphery as intrinsically cultural, thus masking the global and local social, political and economic causes of social inequality and political violence and reducing culture to a fixed and essentialized political entity which is used as an explanation for everything. This deterministic view on ‘culture’ fails to acknowledge human agency and the inherently volatile, fluid and interfluent nature of culture. The setting of ‘Islamic’ culture in oppositional terms to ‘Western’ culture also obscures the proximity and interpenetration between these cultures, blatantly shown by the cultural hybrid systems which have emerged as the consequence of colonialism, imperialism and globalization. Historically, Islam has developed in connection with the West and thus cannot be considered as external and foreign. There is for example a wide held belief

that modernity is singular, uniform and particular to the West. This vision denies the existence of multiple modernities and the existence of cultural hybrid systems which are to be found all across the world and very much also in the Islamic world (Rahman, 2010). Ethnographic research has also shown for example how modernity, postmodernity and tradition are intrinsically interconnected in contemporary life, as for example religious orders of Islamic Sufism have combined traditional religiosity and modern cultural themes in adaptation to urbanization and nationalist politics (Gilsenan, 1983). Monolithic accounts of Islam obscures the intrinsic heterogeneity of Islam in actual societies, especially as globalization has made Islam a complex and diverse cluster of cultures. This is even more so the case during the last decades, as Muslim communities have settled in the West partly as the consequence of economic demands for labor in capitalist economies, thus producing the development of an Islamic diaspora and making it difficult to sustain the myth of Islam as an external Other to the West. Furthermore, Islamic fundamentalism cannot be regarded as anti-modern, because this opposition equates fundamentalism with traditionalism while in reality fundamentalism has emerged as a criticism and rejection of traditional Islam which is seen as a source of weakness in the face of modernity. Puritanical forms of biblical fundamentalism – whether Christian, Jewish or Islamic – can be then seen as modern ideologies opposed to traditionalism and mysticism. (Militant) fundamentalism is then not only an Islamic phenomenon but also occurs in Christianity and Judaism, which are, just as Islam, heterogeneous religions with many schools, interpretations and branches. So has the apparent triumph of fundamentalism been challenged by liberal Muslim scholars and also by radical Muslim women who are Islamist but reject the exclusion of women, compulsory veiling and arranged marriages (Dorraj, 1999).

Orientalism and gender/sexual politics

Imperial feminism and saving discourses

Gender politics has become an integral part of the Orientalist discourse of which the ‘clash of civilizations’ is part of. In a typical orientalist dichotomous lens, the ‘clash’ discourses deem Muslim identities, values and culture as essentially and irredeemably patriarchal and anti-modern, whereas western culture, values and identities are considered as intrinsically progressive, modern and democratic, serving once more as “evidence” of western cultural, political and moral superiority. The result of such oppositional binary relationship is the entanglement of women’s emancipation discourses with nationalist and imperialist western projects, as the policing of Muslim communities and the protection of Western values from “patriarchal” Islam have now become a globally organized phenomenon, all in the name of so-called “gender equality” (Bracke, 2012). This entanglement between feminist narratives and nationalist/imperialist projects is not new at all, as it has been already present since western colonial times and has been already sharply analyzed most notably by feminist post-colonial thinkers. Spivak (1988) for example describes how the rescue script of ‘white men saving brown women from brown men’ has been central to the operation of British colonial rule in her influential book *‘Can The Subaltern Speak?’*. Spivak coins this rescue script in order to show how the English men as colonizers are represented as the protectors and saviors

of the Indian women from their oppressively patriarchal Hindu society. There are then three allegorical figures in this script: the civilized European, the dangerous Muslim man and the oppressed Muslim woman. Underlying this script is the supposed superiority of European civilization, the policing of Muslim men and the urging of Muslims to abandon their 'oppressive' culture and join the 'superior' Western culture and civilization. At the same time, the Muslim woman is yet again silenced and, as in the typical orientalist discourse, she is being spoken for and represented by the white western intellectual, resulting in her symbolic annihilation. The basic premise of Spivak's book is to show how western academic thinking is produced in order to support its imperial economic interests (Spivak, 1988). Similarly, Leila Ahmed (1992) has shown how patriarchal colonialism co-opted the language of feminism and used the issue of women's position in Islamic societies to legitimize colonial attacks in Muslim regions. Ahmed uses the example of English colonialism in Egypt, where British consul general Lord Cromer was a principal advocate of unveiling and of the need to end 'Islamic degradation' of women, while being known as a fervent opponent of feminism in his homeland England. In that way, Ahmed shows how imperialist men embraced a feminist rhetoric abroad while condemning feminism at home, condemning the actions of the (Muslim) Other men and their degradation of women through Islamic patriarchal culture, using it as argument to legitimize Western domination and the subversion – through force or persuasion – of cultures and religions of colonized people. Through this colonial feminist discourse, an intrinsic – but faulty – connection between culture and the status of women is being made, arguing that women's emancipation can only be achieved through the abandonment of the 'backwards' and 'patriarchal' Islamic culture and assimilation to the Western 'progressive' and 'egalitarian' culture, clearly serving Western colonial imperialist interests. This cultural assimilationist discourse clearly ignores how Muslim women can challenge, redefine and critically engage with their own cultural heritage and confuses political and civil rights systems with cultural systems (Ahmed, 1992). Enmeshing these systems together implicates once again an orientalist binary opposition between Islam and the West, in which both are set in fixed terms thus ignoring internal processes within and linkages between both and where the West is granted a superior status, ignoring once again the sexism and lack of real equality in Western societies and ignoring the possibility of reinterpretation and change within Islamic and Arabic cultures and religions, just as much as in Western cultures and religions.

The civilizational discourse of imperial 'feminism' has been accepted and promoted not only by chauvinist male imperialists and members of Western core countries but also by sectarian European feminists who believed it was also their quest to "civilize" the colonized people and "free" the women from their oppressive religion and culture insisting them to change their ways and adopt the "superior" ways of the Europeans. Together with the working class woman and the prostitute, the colonized woman served to establish the 'proper' and 'civilized' subject of the white liberal feminist movement (Bracke, 2012). Their implicit and explicit othering rendered them as objects of the feminist movement, whose task was to 'save' these women through 'civilization', showing how domestic and international/imperial dimensions were intertwined in the creation of the white feminist movement. The civilizational discourse of white imperial feminism not only legitimized western colonial imperial advances throughout the Muslim world but also lasts until today, as the struggle

against the veil and the abandoning of the 'backward' and 'oppressive' Arab and Islamic cultures and religions in favor of westernization is still the common framework within which Western-based academic and feminist studies of Arab/Muslim women are presented and of how Western foreign policies towards Muslim countries are deployed (Ahmed, 1992). So have the deployment of religious symbols such as the veil and the position in women in Islamic societies become once again the signifiers of oppression and the gauge of civilizational achievements against which Islam has been condemned and judged (Bracke, 2012). This coincides with the neo-orientalist turn where religious and cultural experience has been turned into a fixed political category, legitimizing western neo-imperialist interventions in the Middle East (Al-Zo'by, 2015). The War on Terror has also been framed in gendered terms and a recurrent theme for the legitimation of western interventions and occupations in the Middle East has been the alleged oppression of women in Islamic societies. Bernard Lewis, as one of the most prominent advisors to the American administration in the post-9/11 War on Terror, asserts the superiority of Western civilization when he states that the most profound difference between Islam and the West is the status of women:

The emancipation of women, more than any other single issue, is the touchstone of difference between modernization and WesternizationThe emancipation of women is Westernization; both for traditional conservatives and radical fundamentalists it is neither necessary nor useful but noxious, a betrayal of true Islamic values. (Lewis, 2002: 73)

Framing the War on Terror on a civilizational discourse where women's emancipation is central has once again incited western rescue narratives, in which women are constructed as weak, passive and vulnerable and in the need of (military) protection provided by the masculine Western state. In her essay 'Gendering Orientalism', Maryam Khalid (2014) has shown how the narratives of the War on Terror which are centered on the spreading and securing of 'civilization', 'freedom', 'democracy' and 'progress' are based on gendered orientalist logics which legitimize military action. The representation of the Muslim men as aggressive and dangerous to the passive Muslim women and the security of Western countries are central to these narratives. The Muslim man is constructed as devious and dangerous but at the same time is feminized as he is described as weak and cowardly. Media discourses of the West utilizing images of veiled Muslim women as signs of their oppression and the barbarity of the 'patriarchal Muslim culture' and the 'male Eastern Other' in support of western military intervention has characterized these interventions as rescue missions, once again reviving the 'saving brown women from brown men' discourse. The construction and revival of 'Oriental despotism' was also central to the rescue narratives of the War on Terror, in which the rulers of the Islamic countries are characterized as ruthless authoritarian dictators which have to be deposed through military means because of the continuing insistence that the irrational and uncontrolled masculinity of the rulers cannot be reasoned with or simply deterred. Juxtaposed to the Oriental despots are the ordinary ruled Oriental women and men who are feminized by their passivity and their inability to challenge their rulers. Through the feminization of the Oriental subjects, the Orient is constructed as a territory that can be penetrated through the exercise and reassertion of western hypermasculine imperial power.

The reassertion of the superiority of Western masculinity and the infliction of violence on the Middle East is thus based on constructing the enemy Other as both irrationally and uncontrollably hypermasculine – making them discursively disposable through military means – and passively and helplessly feminine – rendering them discursively powerless. Western masculinity in this context must be also saved from ‘irrational masculinity’ and ‘feminization’ through masculinist responses such as militarist solutions (Khalid, 2014). Gender and orientalism are thus central to the operation of the saving discourses of the War on Terror. The removal of the veil in French Algeria and British Egypt proved it and it was once again brought up in the American ‘women-liberating’ mission from Islam in Afghanistan, even though the Bush administration pushed an agenda endangering the hard fought rights for women at home, often in the name of Christian religious truth (Ahmed, 2012).

Seeing Islam as incompatible with women’s emancipation has not only had profound effects on western foreign policies towards Islamic countries but has also had a profound effect on Western countries themselves, including those where there is a significant Muslim diaspora. In her book “In the Name of Women’s Rights: The Rise of Femonationalism”, Sara Farris (2017) examines how some feminist theorists have allied with right-wing nationalist parties and neoliberals in order to justify Islamophobic racist and xenophobic positions based on the prejudices that migrant people – and in particular Muslims – are supposedly and unmistakably sexist and that the supposedly egalitarian Western societies must be protected against them, ignoring the sexism and lack of real equality in Western societies. The co-optation of feminist themes by anti-Islam and xenophobic campaigns characterize Muslim males as dangerous to western societies and Muslim women as inherently oppressed by their ‘patriarchal’ Islamic culture, ignoring once again the particularities of Islam and emphasizing the need to rescue Muslim and migrant women from their own culture, thus justifying racist rhetoric and policies. This practice also clearly serves an economic function according to Farris, as neoliberal civic integration policies and white liberal feminists push Muslim and non-western migrant women into the gendered and racialized segregated domestic and caregiving industries thus serving the interests of the white middle-upper class women and men – a statement that has been extensively developed by the global care chain theory – all the while claiming to promote the emancipation of Muslim and migrant women (Farris, 2017). This belief of a supposed incompatibility between Islam and gender equality has thus been taken up by many western white liberal feminists, most notoriously by liberal feminist Susan Moller Okin (1998) in her controversial and influential essay “Feminism and Multiculturalism”. In this essay, Okin argues that ‘multiculturalism is bad for women’, drawing ‘evidence’ from religious minorities in the West but with a consistent emphasis on Muslim communities. Okin once again raises the argument of the supposed incompatibility of gender equality and Muslim culture in order to argue that there is an incompatibility between cultural diversity and gender equality (ibid., 1998). This incompatibility has been central to the re-emergence of anti-immigrant right wing politics in Europe and its opposition to multiculturalism, as many right-wing populists have proclaimed the ‘failure’ of multiculturalism. Alarming, some feminist activists have joined this overtly right-wing consensus that calls for immigration controls and assimilationist policies specifically directed at immigrants from the Muslim world, thus engaging again in the exclusionary and civilizational discourse of imperial feminism. Central

to this process is a generalized suspicion of Muslims who are deemed to hold on to an alien culture that in its opposition to gender equality threatens core Western values (Fekete, 2006).

The 'white men saving brown women from brown men' rescue narrative has thus transformed into a 'white women saving brown women from brown men' rescue narrative, rendering this civilizational discourse even more effective as white liberal feminists have joined the nationalist/imperialist efforts of 'civilizing' the Muslim other by excluding or assimilating Muslim subjects (Amos & Parmar, 1984). Such alliance between white liberal feminists and right-wing nationalist agendas relies on two main arguments: first of all, Muslim women are in need of help, and second, the usual suspects – feminists and leftists – are not effectively dealing with the 'Islamic oppression' of Muslim women. The first argument is a very well established argument with a long colonial past and neo-colonial present which provides the basis for these rescue scripts, where Muslim women are per definition victims of their own 'patriarchal culture' and need to adopt and assimilate to 'Western culture and values' in order to end their victimization. The second argument relies on the dismissing of the feminist movement and the political left as cultural relativist and too political correct to deal with the 'real' and 'pressing' problems of Muslim women and serves to reshuffle the political landscape, leading to the 'unexpected' coalition with right-wing nationalists to 'effectively' deal with the Muslim 'problem'. To complicate the matters even more, the discourse of some women and men of color have found a place within this hegemonic discourse of the civilizational agenda, adding yet another layer to the rescue narrative which can be termed as 'brown women saving brown women from brown men' (Bracke, 2012). This phenomenon coincides with the neo-orientalist phenomenon mentioned above, in which 'native experts' have come to join the hegemonic orientalist discourse in the West, giving extra legitimation to the nationalist and imperialist efforts of the 'civilizing' West (Tuastad, 2003). These native experts who have found a new-born agency in the Western context use their 'insider authentic knowledge' framed through Oriental stereotypes and fantasies and represent themselves or are represented as 'victims of Islam' in order to give biased and pejorative accounts of Muslim societies and regions which are more protected from critique. These 'exceptional Other' figures operate in tandem with the figure of the Muslim victim devoid of agency, thus making sense once again inside the imperialist frame and reinforcing the symbolic and epistemic violence of the 'saving women' rescue script (Haritaworn, 2008). Central to the rescue women's narratives is a strong emphasis on an understanding of 'false consciousness' narratives, which is how femonationalists recurrently direct themselves at the subjects in 'need of rescue'. According to the rescue narratives, in order to 'liberate' themselves, brown women must abandon their own damaging cultural and religious attachments and assimilate to Western values and norms, and if it's not the brown men hindering them to do so, it must be their own 'false consciousness'. This focus on 'false consciousness' narratives serves once again to silence the agency of Muslim women, and results in their symbolic annihilation. Conclusively, as a result of this civilizational logic, women's emancipation becomes central to the definition of who belongs to the West and who does not, as women's emancipation serves as a (new) measure of 'civilization', serving as an exclusionary mechanism of the West all the while ignoring the complex systemic realities and patterns of gender inequalities and (feminist) agency both in Western and Islamic societies. At the same time, this women's

emancipation discourse also serves as a tool to surveil and control Islam in the West and abroad (Bracke, 2012).

Secularism and religiosity: clash of cultures?

Gender politics has thus become a core aspect of the western liberal democratic settlement and part of its ‘civilizational’ and ‘civilizing’ image, reflected in western foreign and assimilationist internal policies and academic and media attitudes directed mostly toward Muslims. Gender equality has become an irreducible component of the ‘clash of civilizations’ discourse, which Huntington cites as definitive of the West, its modernity and its liberal democratic practices and values as opposed to the ‘conservative’, ‘undemocratic’ and ‘theocratic’ Islamic world and Muslims who are characterized as unable to share these values because of their patriarchal religion and culture (Rahman, 2010). Gender equality has thus become an ‘evidence’ of western moral, cultural and political superiority and central to this argumentation is the supposed inextricable connection between secularism and gender equality – despite the historical reality that gender equality and rights for women and other minorities are only recent additions to the western liberal democratic settlement. Secularism is usually considered to be one of the most defining features of (Western) modernity and the most decisive difference between the Western world and the Islamic world, where the separation between religion and state has yet to become part of the political culture – albeit only exceptionally as in the case of Turkey – and is often described as the most important ‘proof’ of the ‘backwardness’ of the Islamic world and its inability to join (Western) modernity because of the very close relationship between religion and the state in most Muslim-majority countries (Spierings et al., 2009). The most recurrent assumption is that secularism allows for the free expression of sexuality and that it will automatically result in the end of oppression of women in the long run, because it removes dogmas and transcendence as the foundation of social norms and instead treats people as autonomous individuals and agents capable of making their own destiny. Secularism thus becomes the unquestioned standard of judgement for women’s emancipation as it is the taken-for-granted idea in the West – either timeless or evolving – that lays at the basis of its universalist project of human emancipation, thus also including women. Secularism also becomes characterized as the most crucial and definitive touchstone between the ‘secular’, ‘modern’ West and the Islamic world and Muslims whose religion, it is often said, holds on to values and ways of life at odds with modernity. Once again, just like in the orientalist discourse, simple binary oppositions are recalled in order to create a totalizing, monolithic and hierarchical order between West and East – modern/traditional, secular/religious, sexually liberated/sexually oppressed, gender equality/patriarchal hierarchy. Religious communities and societies – and in particular Islam and Muslims – are targeted from this perspective as unmodern relics of another age who hold on to backward and dogmatic traditions and are incapable of exercising agency, with their backwardness being seen as incompatible with modernity and human emancipation (Brown, 2012). However, the idea of an unavoidable causality and connection between secularism and human emancipation and the unambiguous superiority of secular societies over religious societies regarding sexual emancipation can also be questioned and criticized.

In her essay *Sexularism*, Joan Scott (2009) denounces the fact that in contemporaneous invocations of the secular, secularism and issues of sexual difference, sexuality and (gender) equality often become entangled in the wrong way, as in the aforementioned assumption of an inextricable connection between secularism and gender equality. Scott argues that there is no necessary connection between them and that the equality that secularism promises always was and still is troubled by sexual difference. This has to do with the history of secularization in which the equal status of men and women was not a primary concern for those who ultimately came to separate church and state – who were mostly white men – but is only a recent addition to the western secularist establishment’s main concerns, which would be located in the early 20th century (ibid., 2009). Scott draws on theory from Talal Asad, who provides a critique of the idealized secular. Asad (2005) argues that even though the secular is not stable or singular in origin, it works through a particular set of oppositions, among them the political and the religious and the public and the private sphere. In the idealized and established version of secularism, the circumscribing of the (irrational) passions – and thus also religion – to the private sphere makes rational debates and conducts possible in the spheres of the public and the political. This public/private divide has been very crucial to the secular/religious divide but rests on a vision of sexual difference that legitimizes the political and social inequality between men and women. The designation of men to the public sphere and women to the private sphere is an age-long and well-known concern to Western feminist theorists and activists, as since the beginning of Western modernity and secularism, this deeply gendered sphere division and relegation has resulted in the social inferiority of women. The ‘female’ private sphere as conceived by initial mainstream secularists was – and still is – the space for domestic work, religion and sexuality, all of which were associated with the ‘feminine’ and thus as excessive, transgressive, irrational and dangerous forces which had to be contained, as they were seen as threatening to the rational political pursuits of the public sphere. In order to legitimize this new societal order, God was no longer the basis but “nature” and the so-called incontestable ‘natural’ biological difference of sex (ibid., 2005). The point is that at the initial moment of secularism and also throughout its history, women were not considered men’s political equal because the supposedly “natural” difference of sex rooted in physical bodies was considered to be a legitimate basis for inequality. This fundamental division of the sexes in (Western) modern secular societies has historically structured the meaning of secularism, have fed into its normative expectations and have in the end contributed to the production of gendered secular subjects (Scott, 2009).

Those who make grand claims about the superiority of secularism to religion for gender and sexual emancipation ignore that these two categories were never in fact in eternal opposition but are actually discursively interdependent. This has been shown not only in Western feminist history, where most first wave feminists drew on deeply held religious principles and beliefs for their arguments but also in the relationship between Islamism and liberal secularity and modernity, which has been one of proximity and overlapping relationship instead of simple opposition or accommodation as will be shown later on. This statement contradicts the recurrent and assumedly unavoidable equation of some (white liberal secular) feminists of religion with patriarchy, anti-modernity and the subordination of women. Furthermore, the religious agency of women and the blending of liberal democratic values – such as freedom of

choice and women's control of their own bodies – with religiosity are being ignored when pitting religion against secularism in eternal opposition and when equating religion inextricably with backwardness, traditionalism and patriarchal values and norms (Mahmood, 2009). Finally, secular and religious societies must be put into perspective and neither one of them must be associated automatically with a better framework for tackling the problem of sexual difference. As Scott (2009) argues, this is not to say that there are no differences between secular and religious societies in their treatment of women, as both open different kinds of possibilities to men and women in their life trajectories. However, these differences are not as sharp as contemporary debates suggest, and deeming secularism as the antithesis of religion may work to obscure the recurrent problems of gender and sexual inequality in secular societies by attributing these inequalities and all that is negative solely to religion. Furthermore, it mistakenly assumes that, unlike secularism, religion is not affected by changing historical circumstances. In other words, secularism must not be seen as the antithesis of religion but must be seen as a different framework within which to address the problem of sexual difference which affects all of us (ibid., 2009). As Leila Ahmed argues, “there is no validity to the notion that progress for women can be achieved only by abandoning the ways of a native androcentric culture in favor of those of another culture” (Ahmed, 1992: 244). This idea was the product of a particular historical moment – i.e. colonialism and imperialism – where the notion existed that there is an intrinsic connection between issues of culture and the status of women and that progress for women could only be achieved through the abandoning of their native culture and the assimilation to Western norms and values. However, as the history of Western women shows, it has never been argued by white European feminists that Western women could only be liberated from the oppressiveness of their patriarchal society through the abandonment of Western culture and the adoption of some other culture. This idea seems absurd but it is consistently demanded by many white liberal and imperial feminists to Arab and other non-western societies in order to improve the status of women. Instead, the feminist demand of a need to reject the androcentrism of whatever culture, religion or tradition in which women find themselves must be met by engaging critically with and challenging and redefining one's own cultural heritage (Ahmed, 1992).

The move towards homonationalism

As previously discussed, particular discourses of women's equality and gender emancipation have become a 'marker' of civilizational politics according to the civilizational discourse of femonationalism and imperial “feminists”. This civilizational discourse and its rescue scripts have been used as an effective tool to reject and dismiss multicultural society and as a mechanism to survey and control non-Western ethnic groups and religious and ethnic minorities in the West, in particular Islam. However, a more recent addition to these civilizational politics has entered the geopolitical landscape framed according to the logic of the ‘clash of civilizations’ from the 1990s onwards, forming the basis for many Western interventions in Muslim-majority countries and legitimizing exclusionary and assimilationist politics towards Muslim minorities in the West. This has to do with Western imperialist, civilizational and assimilationist understandings of gay emancipation discourses. Even though LGBT rights are both more recent additions to the Western democratic settlement and far less

evenly accepted and aspired across the West in general than women's rights and emancipation goals, the acceptance of sexual diversity has now increasingly become a new 'index' of civilization and an exemplary 'test' of 'western' liberal democratic cultural credentials in a way that highly resembles the imperial feminist discourse, perhaps precisely because it is at the margins of human rights discourses (Rahman,2010). Islamophobic rhetoric surrounding Western imperialist gay emancipation discourses has been increasingly deployed in order to legitimize aggressive Western imperial interventions in Muslim countries, such as in the ongoing War on Terror, where the creation of a queer, acceptant and diverse world is clearly not the ultimate goal but where the sustenance of Western supremacy and imperial interests in the Muslim world is the ultimate goal (Puar, 2018).

Many LGBT activists, human rights organizations and scholars have joined the imperial efforts of the War on Terror based on the assumption that Muslim societies and Islam as such are intrinsically homophobic and sexist in nature and that only the propagation and implementation of their (Western) understandings of gay emancipation may 'save' LGBT persons living in Muslim countries from their 'oppressive' Muslim cultures. As an example, following the hanging of two teenagers in Iran supposedly for the alleged crime of being involved homosexual activity (although it has been claimed that these youngsters were involved in rape rather than consensual sex), Western conservative commentators such as Andrew Sullivan, activists such as Peter Tatchell, LGBT civil rights organizations such as Human Rights Campaign and even political actors such as Log Cabin Republicans, an organization of gay and lesbian members of the US Republican Party, have appealed to force and coercion or have rallied behind the War on Terror's efforts in condemning Iran's government actions. The Log Cabin Republicans, for example, have published a press release which condemns the hanging of two 'gay' Iranian teenagers and reaffirms the organization's commitment to the War on Terror. The organization's president Patrick Guerriero was quoted as saying that "this barbarous slaughter clearly demonstrates the stakes in the global war on terror. Freedom must prevail over radical Islamic extremism" (Rao, 2015). The extreme outrage over the hangings of these two teenagers from the part of these conservative gay activists seems to have overlooked the danger that the president of the country at that time, Republican President George W. Bush, posed to hard-won LGBT rights in their own home country, as Bush had for example called for an amendment that would render same-sex marriage unconstitutional in the US. The support for the War on Terror also seems to overlook the extreme homophobia inside the US war machinery, as was brutally shown in the Abu Ghraib prison, where simulated or real stereotypical homosexual acts and rape were utilized in order to humiliate the prisoners, rendering them as feminized oriental Others (Puar, 2018).

In contrast to the US approach, which takes a more missionary approach when it comes to LGBT rights thus legitimizing imperialist interventions as part of its expansionist military 'civilizing and liberating mission' across the Muslim world, Europe has used gay emancipation discourses as a rhetoric in a defensive way in order to control tighter or to even close its borders against undesired migrants. Several European nations have come to represent themselves as 'sexual democracies' where sexual liberation, tolerance towards sexual

minorities and gender equality have increasingly come to represent markers of Western identity, values and norms as modern, progressive and superior in order to justify harsher anti-immigration policies. Once again, in this European context, orientalist Othering processes embedded in sexuality discourses are being used in order to legitimize and sustain European anti-immigration discourses, policies and practices, where the ‘sexually liberated’ Europeans are under threat of migrant communities – more specifically Muslims – which are portrayed as essentially backwards, traditional and homophobic (Heimer, 2019). This idea of a supposed incompatibility between the ‘sexually liberated Westerner’ and the ‘homophobic and sexist Muslim’ which once again brings the Orientalist binary opposition where Western identity is in complete opposition to the oriental Other was most clearly championed by the Dutch politician Pim Fortuyn, a controversial and openly gay politician who in constructing and portraying Islam as an essentially ‘backward’ and ‘homophobic’ culture helped in constructing the ‘sexual exceptionalism’ of Dutch national identity which served to exclude Muslims from the national imaginary. Central in Fortuyn’s discourse was the portraying of sexual diversity and acceptance as crucial to the Dutch identity and national norms and values, which is under threat since the arrival of (Muslim) migrant communities (Aydemir, 2012). This discourse implies a time where gay liberation could allegedly be taken for granted and where this project was brought to completion, a time which has of course never existed, which has been termed as ‘homonostalgia’. In a way that reminds us of post-feminist discourse and Okin’s dilemma, the homonostalgic discourse of Pim Fortuyn implies that the long fought gay rights are now under threat because of multicultural society – read, Muslim migrants – and that all contemporary homophobia stems out of migrant communities, thus serving to exclude and/or assimilate migrants (Jivraj & De Jong, 2011). This type of discourse not only erases the agency and critical ability of Muslims and the existence of queer Muslims but also serves to erase the ongoing struggles of queer people in the European context and the homophobia endemic to Western cultures, thus exposing this paradox: while Western nations use this discourse to marginalize and exclude Muslim countries and communities, sexual minorities are denied basic and equal rights in these Western countries (Robinson, 2016).

Pim Fortuyn’s assimilationist and exclusionary gay emancipation discourse is not an isolated event in contemporary queer politics but forms part of a civilizational current within LGBT politics that strongly resonates with the colonial/imperial feminist discourse which has been previously mentioned. As Modood and Ahmad (2007) show, sexual diversity has become a key area of conflict in the debate of multiculturalism in Europe:

The issue of sexuality, then, is in fact one of the pivotal points of contention between secular liberals and ‘mainstream’, practising Muslims within Western multicultural societies, and among Muslims themselves. It, together with the wider theme of sexual freedom, is central to the political hostility against Muslims in, for example, the Netherlands, where gay sociology professor Pim Fortuyn led a popular movement to restrict Muslim immigration because the attitudes of Muslims were alleged to be threatening traditional Dutch sexual liberalism. (Modood & Ahmad, 2007: 199)

In other words, some gay activists have joined the aforementioned (white liberal) femonationalists in the overtly right-wing consensus that calls for more stringent immigration

controls which specifically target immigrants coming from the Muslim world. Just as in the civilizational logic of femonationalists, sexual freedom has become central to the definition of who belongs to a (Western) nation and who does not, thus becoming an effective tool in surveilling and controlling Islam both in the West and abroad (Bracke, 2012). Central to this process again is a ubiquitous suspicion of Muslims who are portrayed as holding on to a patriarchal and homophobic culture that by opposing gay rights and gender equality, threatens core European values (Fekete, 2006). The overtly right-wing consensus of some gay and lesbian activists with racist and xenophobic nationalism, that in their defense of gay rights in Europe invoke a discourse intolerant and exclusive towards ethnic and religious minorities – especially against Muslims – has also been described by the queer theorist Jasbir Puar as ‘homonationalism’, a concept that conflates the concepts ‘homonormative’ and ‘nationalism’. Homonationalism as a theoretical concept refers to the recognition and inclusion of some homosexuals into the national imaginary while contingent upon the segregation and disqualification of racial and sexual others from the nation (Puar, 2018)

This statement thus implies that some, but not all queer subjects have been included within a nationalistic framework. These included homosexuals are otherwise described by Lisa Duggan (2003) as ‘homonormative’ homosexuals. Homonormativity is a political strategy used within sexual minority communities which operates within a heteronormative framework and thus reinforces heteronormative institutions and values. Under this heteronormative framework, heterosexuality and homosexuality are binary opposites and heterosexual relations – where complementary gender roles between masculine men and feminine women are naturalized – are considered superior and the norm. Monogamy, marriage, procreation and heterosexuality are considered superior to all other sexual expressions such as homosexuality and polygamy. In a homonormative framework, the supposed superiority of heteronormative relations, practices (such as monogamy, domesticity, reproduction and marriage) and institutions (such as legal marriage and military membership) are not being questioned or challenged but are, in contrary, upheld and reproduced, such that sexual minorities seek acceptance and inclusion within these particular institutions and practices as they are more valued than the demands in other more radical arenas, such as equal labor rights and equal access to healthcare. Homonormative subjects within the mainstream gay and lesbian politics thus no longer seek to question, challenge or resist heterosexual norms, culture and heteronormative oppression of non-conforming sexual and gender subjects, but instead seek assimilation in their drive towards social acceptance and integration into heteronormative and patriarchal society. Sexual minorities can thus make a claim for their rights by asserting that gay and lesbian individuals are equal to their heterosexual counterparts except for their sexual attractions and partnerships, thus upholding the central premise that heterosexuality is the norm. Homonormativity also implies that the rights that sexual minorities can gain can only be framed through certain heteronormative institutions and that those gays and lesbians who can assimilate into heteronormative structures and conform to their respective gender roles receive more rights and privileges than those who cannot or do not assimilate. In short, homonormativity is a form of neoliberal sexual politics that “does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture

anchored in domesticity and consumption” (Duggan, 2003: 50). Although homonormativity has reconfigured and (slightly) enlarged the boundaries of what is considered to be ‘normal’ and accepted sexual expressions and identities in – some but not all – Western nations, homonormative subjects are configured along specific racialized, classed, gendered and sexual scripts. Ultimately, it is only a small segment of the gay and lesbian population – those who are predominantly white, middle-class and gender-normative – who have gained increased – but in no terms total – visibility, acceptance, political legitimacy and exercise of rights in the Western context (Robinson, 2016). With the rise of the gay consumer in the 1980s and 1990s – under the premise of marketers that childless homosexuals had enormous disposable income – white, middle-class homosexuals conforming to their from-birth assigned sex and respective gender identities and expressions (i.e. cis-gendered gays and lesbians) have been allowed to access racial and class privileges by entering into the rights and privileges of what Leticia Sabsay (2012) calls ‘sexual citizenship’.

Sexual citizenship refers to the institution, under the framework of political liberalism, in which (certain) subjects may be entitled to be a potential claimant of sexual rights. Developed in the 1990s, the notion of sexual citizenship points to the current sexual politics of recognition and inclusion, whereby particular gender and sexual identities are recognized so that specific sexual rights (such as right of freedom of expression and self-definition) are addressed to these particular communities and whereby differential access to ‘universal’ rights and citizenship are fought for by these recognized communities (ibid., 2012). As previously mentioned, recently the homonormative subject has been included into the Western liberal sexual democratic settlement, meaning that the heterocentric horizon of the classical liberal sexual democratic settlement has been broadened, although not radically challenged (Puar, 2018). However, the politics of recognition concerning sexual diversity which depends on sexual norms of citizenship pointing to both the normalization of former sexual ‘others’ – i.e. homonormative gays and lesbians – and the new configuration of sexual respectability, is still based on the inclusion of some former sexual ‘others’ – now recognized as sexual citizens – and the exclusion of sexual dissidents who challenge and question heteronormativity and homonormativity (Sabsay, 2012). The scope of this ‘sexual diversity’ thus does not easily encompass those who are not normalized in the sexual democratic settlement, such as: gender queers, trans people, marginalized queer people of color, low-income queers and those who exhibit sexual preferences/orientations and gender identities/expressions which are not easily classified, recognized or accepted according to available institutionalized gender and sexual variants (Robinson, 2016). As the homonormative version of the queer has become included in the Western sexual democratic settlement, some homosexual subjects become complicit with the current entwinement of Western nationalist and imperial projects with sexual progressive rhetoric and politics instead of being essentially or automatically excluded from or opposed to nationalist formations, as Pim Fortuyn has shown. As the notion of homonationalism – homonormative nationalism – shows, the current liberal rights discourse depends on the national recognition and inclusion of some gay lives on the one hand, and the exclusion and segregation of racial-sexual others from the national imaginary on the other hand (Puar, 2018). Even though the sexualization of citizenship has expanded the understanding of what a ‘citizen’ means and has opened up the possibility of gaining more

rights to some former sexual ‘others’, it still predicates upon the restricted institution of citizenship, which operates on a Western sexual liberal framework (Sabsay, 2012). As Isin (2002) argues, the liberal subject of rights, or the ‘citizen’, still predicates upon the inclusion of those who conform to certain norms and modes of regulation and the exclusion of those who do not conform or assimilate. This is configured through an orientalist view that depends on the production of the oriental Other as lacking the abstract and universal subject position that precisely characterizes the subject as a citizen. In other words, the citizen is already an Orientalized construct, and the model of sexual democratization that establishes the sexual citizen thus depends on the exclusion and/or assimilation into a teleological model of those who are considered as backwards or outsider – i.e. the oriental ‘Other’.

The Orientalized construct of the sexual citizen is best represented by the entanglement between nationalist/imperialist discourse and gay emancipation discourses – i.e. homonationalism. Indeed, it is – inter alia – through the framing of the oriental ‘Other’ as intrinsically sexually conservative, intolerant and anti-democratic that Western nations have been able to exclude – mainly Muslim – immigrants from the national imaginary and from achieving full citizenship through anti-migrant policies (Puar, 2018). This shows once again how heteronormativity – of which homonormativity forms part of – must be understood as part of racialized social formations of white supremacy, as it forms the basis for legitimation and regulation through the exclusion and discrimination of other non-normative bodies, sexualities and lived experiences, including LGBTQ+ subjects (Robinson, 2016). Homonationalism, as a racialized heteronormative construct, thus not only serves to grant rights to homonormative sexual minorities and exclude the oriental ‘Others’ within a nationalistic exclusionary/assimilationist framework, but it also revives the rescue scripts which are so central to the colonial/imperial feminist discourses. However, these scripts are transposed to the contemporary context of ‘sexual diversity’, thus also legitimating the ‘failure’ of multiculturalism in Western nations and the exclusion of migrants to preserve ‘sexual diversity’ and Western ‘values and norms’ – read, white gays and lesbians – although the inclusion of homonormative gays and lesbians into the national imaginary is a very recent phenomenon. So has the ‘saving women from brown men’ rescue script become ‘saving (white) gays from brown men’. In those Western countries where the homonormative subject has become embedded in the sexual democratic settlement, this rescue script means first of all ‘protecting’ white gays from minoritarian Muslims or migrants. In the end, the white, middle-class, cis-gendered homonormative subject stands as the central figure of mainstream gay and lesbian identity politics in the Western context. The ‘saving white gays’ rescue script constructs the homonormative subject as being under threat of ethnic minorities and migrants, who are portrayed as essentially homophobic, and thus legitimizes the exclusion and even deportation of ethnic minorities and migrants (Bracke, 2012).

However, this saving discourse can also be applied to ‘brown gays’, transforming the discourse into ‘saving brown gays from brown men’. This is best represented by some Western nations’ will to accept LGBTQ+ refugees into their country, also known as asylum claims based on sexual orientation. This is for example the case in the UK, where, according to Heimer (2020), the “provision of sexuality-based refugee asylum could provide a fertile

terrain to homonationalist representations of the UK as a safe space and benevolent defender of non-Western queers in need of protection from the supposedly ‘backwards’ homophobic cultures of their own countries” (Heimer, 2020: 178). The othering logic of this (very selective) integration is revealed however when stricter immigration policies are legitimized because of this very portrayal of non-Western countries and migrants as being homophobic by default, thus confirming the need to protect ‘modern’ Western countries from those ‘homophobic’ cultures. Not only does this homonationalist discourse affect – mainly Muslim – non-Western migrants in a negative way by legitimizing stricter immigration policies, but it also works disadvantageous to those migrants these policies are supposed to ‘protect’ – LGBTQ+ refugees. This is because homonationalist discourse and its subsequent policies are based on the normative version of the queer person – the homonormative subject – which most non-Western LGBTQ+ migrants cannot live up to, as reflected on the very low level of approval rate of sexuality-based refugee asylum claims (Heimer, 2020). In the UK, for example, the approval rate represents 22% of the total claims in 2017, which is 10% lower than for all types of application (Savage, 2018). One explanation for this is the centrality of the homonormative subject in the consideration of the asylum application and in the framing of the asylum decision-making process, of which a Western model of gay liberation and emancipation through the ‘closet narrative’ and the subsequent liberation through the ‘coming out metaphor’ is a central part of. This homonormative understanding of ‘coming out’ strongly relies on an individualist model in which middle- to upper-class and white racial privileged gays and lesbians who are able to perform a gay ‘outed’ identity are the main point of reference (Jung, 2015). The performance of such an ‘outed’ identity relies on such Eurocentric understandings of being gay such as participating in the gay economy, marching in gay prides and frequenting gay clubs, which often does not match the lived experiences of queer migrant people of color, particularly due to widespread racism found in white gay spaces and economic obstacles. The divergence and inability to assimilate to homonormativity leads to the construction of the non-normative sexualities and lived experiences of queer migrants of color as sexually repressed, discreet and family oriented as opposed to Western ‘liberated gays’ who are marked by specific norms of individualism, visibility and consumption practices, meaning often a refusal to refugee status for many LGBTQ asylum seekers who are deemed as ‘gays who cannot properly be gay’ (Perez, 2005).

‘Gay Imperialism’

The ‘saving gays’ homonationalist discourse has not only served to reinforce stricter anti-immigration policies thus effectively excluding non-Western immigrants, but it has also served to propagate Western (cultural) imperialist interests around the world, especially in the Muslim world. By constructing Muslim societies and cultures as essentially sexually backwards, conservative and homophobic compared to the sexually progressive and democratic Western nations and white communities, the ‘saving brown gays from brown men’ rescue narrative has proven effective in legitimizing Western interventions and aggressive (cultural) imperial policies in the Muslim world, often in the name of ‘sexual diversity’, ‘democracy’ and protecting gays and lesbians from their ‘oppressive patriarchal and homophobic’ culture (Puar, 2018). This orientalist logic also serves a double purpose detrimental to the rights of gays and lesbians everywhere: while this homonationalist

discourse marginalizes and excludes (gay and lesbian) Muslim communities and countries, the West is constructed as essentially socially and sexually progressive and democratic which is only 'endangered' by non-Western immigrants, thus erasing the pervasive homophobia and lack of real social equality still present in Western societies (Robinson, 2016). The organizations and entities that represent the missionary and imperialist task of liberating – or saving – gays across the world and the homonationalist discourse they produce based on their human rights and homonormative gay emancipation discourse have been otherwise termed as the 'Gay International' by Joseph Massad (2002). Representatives of the Gay International are such organizations as Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and white Western gay male dominated organizations such as the International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA) and the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (IGLHRC). By using the homonormative subject as the 'universal' point of reference, the Gay International exercises epistemological violence in the Muslim world by forcing it to share the hegemonic western mode of understanding the sexual subject, or in other words forcing them to be assimilated in western sexual epistemology, destroying the various culturally specific sexual practices of Muslim societies through this framework and only offering admission into democratic modernity as long as they conform and assimilate to western norms – i.e. secularity, modernity and western understandings of sexual norms (Massad, 2002).

The epistemological violence of the international campaigns of the Gay International is a project that can best be described by Massad as incitement to discourse, where the "very ontology of gayness is instituted in a discourse that could have only two reactions to the claims of universal gayness: support them or oppose them without ever questioning their epistemological underpinnings" (Massad, 2002: 374). Given the strong connection between the international gay and human rights organizations and imperialist entities, the Gay International is perceived as part of Western encroachment on Arab and Muslim cultures in the context of Arab and Islamist (patriarchal) nationalism, resulting in a backlash from Islamic and Arab nationalists and harsher condemnation and punishment of same-sex sexual practices where previously it was unenforced or inexistent. Therefore, through incitement to discourse according to Massad, "the Gay International is in fact heterosexualizing a world that is being forced to be fixed by a Western binary" (Massad, 2002: 383). What is at stake here is pure and raw western cultural imperialism in the same fashion as colonial feminism, where "the Gay International is destroying social and sexual configurations of desire in the interest of reproducing a world in its own image, one wherein its sexual categories and desires are safe from being questioned" (Massad, 2002: 385). Although Massad has been criticized by not taking into account lived experience, disregarding the existence of gay and lesbian (Muslim) subjects in the Arab and Muslim world and belittling or shoving off the responsibility for ongoing state violence and human rights violations towards gays and lesbians in the Muslim world exclusively to Western 'imperialists' (Rahman, 2010; Habib, 2010), he does make a point in saying that many international gay and human rights organizations use a Eurocentric and Islamophobic account of the sexual subject – i.e. a homonormative account – in their condemnation of Muslim countries and societies for their treatment of gays and lesbians, without taking into account culturally specific modes of sexuality and without questioning the epistemological underpinnings of what their meaning of

'gay' is. thus legitimizing western (cultural) imperialist interventions in the Muslim world which often has little to do with human rights and which in many instances has a contradictory effect on human and LGBTQ rights.

Islam and homosexuality

Religion and homosexuality

Nowadays, homosexuality is widely condemned and even punished in many mainstream and conservative religious societies and communities from the three major Abrahamic religions alike – being Judaism, Christianity and Islam – which are among the world's biggest religions and which together encompass more than half of the world's population. Even though today there is an emergence of small, alternative religious groups and communities within all three major religions who are (fully) acceptant of people who engage in same-sex unions and sexual/romantic activity, many mainstream and most conservative religious leaders, scholars and practitioners of these religions agree that homosexuality (as an identity or as a sexual/romantic act or preference) is either a sin that must be condemned and/or reversed or a crime that must be punished (Hildebrandt, 2015). Many of such conservative religious leaders use anti-gay rhetoric in order to incite hatred against LGBTQ+ people, such as the archbishop of Krakow, Marek Jedraszewski, who in the 75th anniversary of the Warsaw uprising by Polish resistance fighters against Nazi occupation in 2019 claimed that Poland is under a siege from gay rights activist campaigners, comparing them to Poland's former Communist occupiers: "Our land is no longer affected by the red plague, which does not mean that there is no new one that wants to control our souls, hearts and minds (...) not Marxist, Bolshevik, but born of the same spirit, neo-Marxist. Not red, but rainbow" (Reuters, 2019). Similarly condemning, Jerusalem's chief rabbi Shlomo Amar declared that homosexuals cannot be religious and that homosexuality is uncontrollable lust that can be overcome with simple fear of God, calling homosexuality an "abomination", a "sin against the Jewish people" and advocating for conversion therapy for homosexual people (Winer, 2019). In the same line of thought, Muslim theologian and chairman of the International Union of Muslim Scholars Yusuf al-Qaradawi has stated that homosexuality is contrary to the regulation of sexual desires in Islam, claiming it is a "perverted act (...) a reversal of the natural order, a corruption of man's sexuality, and a crime against the rights of females (the same applies equally to the case of lesbianism)" (Siraj, 2009: 43).

Many of such religious scholars and leaders derive their condemnation of homosexuality from orthodox and conservative readings of their sacred texts (the Bible, the Torah and the Quran), most specifically from the story of the divine punishment of the towns of Sodom and Gomorrah (in the Quran referred as the people of Lot), which runs through all three Abrahamic religions. The destruction of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah has been interpreted in many conservative currents of all three religions as the punishment of God towards homosexuals or people who practice same-sex anal penetrative sexual acts – i.e. sodomy, a word which is derived from the same biblical excerpt (Hildebrandt, 2015). Nevertheless, these conservative interpretations ignore that there is no mention of the word 'homosexual' in either of the sacred texts, as sexual orientation is a modern construct, and that

nowadays there are alternative interpretations of this passage which claim that God's destruction was due to inhospitality, sexual assault and theft (Yip, 2005). Either way, conservative and orthodox interpretations of the sacred texts have led many religious practitioners, scholars and leaders to believe that homosexuality is a sin that must be condemned or a crime that must be punished. Examples of such punishments range from psychological methods such as (forced) conversion therapies to physical punishments such as incarceration, lashings, stoning and even death. However, such hate speech towards gays and lesbians do not only remain in words but also lead to detrimental actions on the lived experiences of many (real or suspected) gays, lesbians and people caught in same-sex acts, such as social isolation from the rest of the community, incarceration, beatings, torture and killings perpetrated by homophobic individuals, groups and even states which are in many instances influenced by (ultra)conservative religious interpretations (Hildebrandt, 2015). This is not to say that homophobic behavior and assaults are caused by conservative religious thinking only, as heterosexism is deeply rooted in secular psychiatric and medicinal thinking (Drescher, 2015). Such homophobic assaults thus range from individual assaults such as the stabbing of six Jerusalem Pride attendees by an ultra-Orthodox Jew in 2015, or the Orlando gay nightclub shooting in 2016 which left 49 people dead, to group assaults such as gay bashings and persecutions of gay people, and finally to state violence such as incarceration, state-sponsored persecution and death penalties for homosexuals in countries like Uganda, Iran and Sudan, which are in many instances religiously influenced by conservative religious leaders, scholars and organizations. Widespread homophobia in different societies – religiously influenced or not – thus not only results in many human rights violations across the world, but also results in stigmatization of and discrimination towards LGBTQ+ individuals at many personal and societal levels, leading to the deterioration of their mental and physical health and leading to different barriers in society, such as social isolation and discrimination at the workplace and in the health care system (Ferguson, 2018).

Homosexuality in the contemporary “Muslim world”

The official state attitude towards (open) homosexuality in Islamic or Muslim-majority countries and regions nowadays is generally negative to very repressive, as homosexual activity is illegal in many countries and punishments may be imposed, ranging from imprisonment and torture to death penalty, which in many instances are enacted in countries such as Iran, Mauritania, Libya, Nigeria, Sudan, Saudi Arabia and Morocco. Although homosexual activity is legal in many Muslim-majority countries such as Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon and Kosovo and although punishment for homosexuality goes largely unenforced in most countries that have penalty laws, (state) discrimination and human rights abuses against LGBTQ+ individuals is still largely prevalent in most Muslim-majority countries. In the end, many – if not most – Muslim societies and communities also hold a negative view towards LGBTQ+ individuals and homosexual activity (McGee, 2016). Even though cross-national and cross-cultural surveys are subjects of controversy in their methods of analysis, the World Values Survey conducted in 34 countries across the world between May to October 2019, has shown that the few countries surveyed with Muslim population large enough for analysis had drastically low levels of acceptance of homosexuality, which is particularly low among adherents of Islam. However, this statement is nuanced when admitting that in Nigeria, a

country with a similar amount of Christian and Muslim population – attitudes towards homosexuality among Christians are not very different from those among Muslims, both groups having 6% and 8% level of acceptance of homosexuality respectively. Furthermore, as the survey shows, in a predominantly Muslim country such as Turkey, the level of acceptance is greater than in a predominantly Christian country such as Ukraine. Around all countries, religious affiliation plays a crucial role in views towards acceptance of homosexuality, as those who are religiously unaffiliated tend to be more accepting than those who are religiously affiliated. This is proven by a country like South Korea, where those who are religiously unaffiliated are almost twice as likely to accept homosexuality as those who are Christian or Buddhist (Poushter & Kent, 2020). The negative view of many Muslims towards homosexuality is also apparent in diasporic communities around the world, as is in the case of British heterosexual Muslims in the UK, who also hold very negative views towards homosexuality in their majority, as they combine Western cultural homophobia and conservative religious views when legitimizing their heterosexist attitudes (Siraj, 2009).

There are several explanations for such widespread heterosexist thoughts and behavior among Muslims. One of such explanations is the prevalence of patriarchal interpretations of Islam as determined by the discourses of the male heterosexist political elites and religious scholars and leaders, which is based on a strictly defined hierarchical structure as the basis of male/female and sexual relations rather than the interpretation of Islam as an ethical structure that advocates moral and spiritual equality for all human beings (Ahmed, 1992). Although there are many variations of Islamic branches and interpretations and various Muslim societies which may differ in their sexual and gender orders, many Muslims nowadays believe in the binary separation and complementarity of the sexes, where men and women have been made distinct by ‘nature’ in their dependence on one another. This separation of the sexes is also based on strict gender and sexual roles and expectations with clear power imbalances between men and women. Marriage, children and family are very central in Muslim societies and communities, especially as the family plays a central role in providing emotional support, social identity and economic resources (Strier, 2014). Marriage is generally reserved for heterosexual couples, and this heterocentric sexual order results in a hierarchical sexual order, which is heterosexist. According to Herek (1992: 89), heterosexism is “an ideological system that denies, denigrates and stigmatizes any non-heterosexual form of behavior, identity, relationship or community”. Heterosexism thus defines heterosexuality as natural and superior to non-heterosexual identities, including homosexuality.

Although the pleasure of sexuality is celebrated for both men and women, in contrast to Christianity, it is crucial for Muslims to organize sexual urges and desires, as otherwise it is believed that unrestrained sexual drives might endanger and misguide the social order – especially marriage. In many Muslim societies, this sexual order is determined by conservative interpretations of Islamic teachings about sexuality. As such, often there is a strict separation between men and women which is maintained on religious grounds, as both premarital and extramarital sexual relations are prohibited, thus resulting in very frequent homosocial behavior. Also, other forms of sexuality outside of wedding are illegitimate and lifestyle patterns such as celibacy and bachelorhood are extremely discouraged. In

conservative interpretations of Islam, such illegitimate sexual behavior also includes homosexuality, as sex is only considered to be legitimate inside marriage and between a man and a woman. As Muslim societies and communities are generally based on interconnectedness and interdependence with the family and community – i.e. they are kinship-based systems – there is a strong emphasis on upholding social norms and on subordinating individual interests under the interests of the community and maintaining an ‘Islamic’ ethos (Siraj, 2009). Besides the advancement of the Gay International, as has been previously discussed, and other Western colonial and imperial influences on the sexual arrangements of Muslim societies, as will be discussed later on, another reason for the low level of acceptance of homosexuality in many Muslim societies is the lack of ‘responsive democracy’ as well as greater levels of poverty, which both also affect the attitudes of Muslims towards homosexuality. In the end, emancipative values such as sexual liberation and free love come after the more basic needs are met, such as food, shelter and security. In other words, in situations where people continue to struggle and are preoccupied with securing the basic needs for mere survival, emancipative values are more difficult to be developed or to even be considered important. This poverty, in its turn, is also largely the result of colonial and neocolonial oppression and exploitation (Beckers, 2010).

However, homosexual activity goes largely unpunished and even in many cases tolerated in Muslim societies, as long as it is done discretely and when it’s relegated to the private sphere, in other words when it’s not done in a public and openly visible or voiced way. This shows how the Eastern closet doesn’t operate in the same manner as the Western closet, as homosexuality in many Muslim-majority societies and countries can be ‘absolutely accommodated’ so long as it doesn’t contravene certain rules and obligations which are expected from mainstream Muslims, such as marriage and reproduction. This may explain the relatively low level of punishments and persecutions of people engaged in same-sex sexual activities in Muslim-majority countries, as despite occasional crackdowns and sporadic incidences of arrests, torture and executions against people who are unlucky enough to get caught in homosexual activity, the authorities generally do not actively seek out to arrest or persecute gays, lesbians and people who practice same-sex sexual activity, as long as their activities and/or identities remain discreet and hidden from the public eye (Dunne, 2006). In contrast, the Western approach on illegal homosexual activity – before it was legalized in the second half of the 20th century – was much more active and permeating in people’s personal lives, as was the case during the British wave of homophobia in the 1950s, where just in the year 1952, thousands of people engaged in homosexual activity were persecuted for sodomy, attempted sodomy, indecent assault and gross indecency. However, the problem with such penalizing laws nowadays in Muslim-majority countries is that, even if not vigorously enforced, they officially dismiss the approval of (open) homosexuality, thus legitimizing – coupled with the reproaches of religious scholars – the discrimination of queer individuals at an everyday level and may also provide an excuse and moral support for the actions by vigilantes, as is the case in Chechnya, where state and non-state actors engage in extrajudicial imprisonment, torture and killings. Even though silence and repression may prevent prosecution (Whitaker, 2016), Ahmadi (2012) hesitates whether silence is not a punishment in

and of itself, especially as this silence “is imposed strictly given overt acts are still sometimes punished by death” (2012: 554).

Homosexuality, Islam and colonialism

Attributing condemnations and punishments against homosexuality as an inextricable part of Islam is a gross misunderstanding and oversimplification, as even if the words of the sacred scriptures are fixed and unchangeable, they are and will always be subject to human interpretation – whether from the part of scholars, leaders or practitioners. Human interpretation of the sacred texts is, in its turn, influenced by social, geographical and historical contexts and factors, even if fundamentalists and orthodox people from every religion fervently deny the existence of such thing as human interpretation of religion (Whitaker, 2016). In order to illustrate this, there is historical evidence of many Muslim societies and cultures in the past where same-sex love and sexual practices were widely tolerated and even celebrated or idealized at times. Since the early stages of Islamic history – more specifically in the pre-colonial world – instances of same-sex acts, love and sexual desire have been recorded and represented in various cultural artistic and literary artifacts, such as miniatures, poems and texts. For example, Urdu poetry from the seventeenth century and eighteenth century offers considerable evidence of how a Muslim society in South Asia idealized same-sex love. Consider this poem written by the famous 14th century Persian Islamic Sufi mystical poet Hafez, translated by Daniel Ladinsky:

It happens all the time in heaven,
And some day
It will begin to happen
Again on earth —
That men and women who are married,
And men and men who are
Lovers,
And women and women
Who give each other
Light,
Often will get down on their knees
And while so tenderly
Holding their lover's hand,
With tears in their eyes,
Will sincerely speak, saying,
My dear,
How can I be more loving to you;
How can I be more kind?
(Ahmed, 2016)

In the pre-colonial Muslim world, such homosexual behavior and romantic/sexual relationships were quite common and were widely accepted in the society as well as in the clergy. In the Muslim cultures of this time, sexual orientation was not considered to be the a

basis for identity, as the modern categories ‘heterosexual’, ‘homosexual’, ‘gay’ or ‘lesbian’ were virtually inexistent at that time, showing that the sexual categories (heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual) are not universal but Western constructions. The term “gay”, for example, points to the people who define themselves according to this specific sexual orientation as an identity and not those who practice same-sex sexual behavior. While sex between two men was considered quite common in these Muslim societies, those who engaged in such sexual behavior didn’t define themselves as “gay” (Kligerman, 2007). The distinction between sexual and gender identities, made by modern Western sexuality schemes and the hierarchy implied within the heterosexual matrix where there are different kinds and degrees of sexual predilections and of masculinity and femininity, has had little resonance in Muslim societies until recently (Erwing, 2011). These sexual categories and sexual identities came much later with the advent of Western modernity, which were simultaneously formed by Western colonialist and imperialist linkages around the globe – now continued by the advent and incursion of the Gay International as described by Massad. However, still nowadays there is ethnographic evidence of sexual practices in some Muslim societies such as contemporary Pakistan, which suggests that the European colonial discourse of the heterosexual matrix is still not hegemonic: i.e. it hasn’t disciplined Muslim sexual orders into the European model of fixed hierarchical sexual categories (Erwing, 2011). Also in Pakistan, same-sex love is in some instances still celebrated, as is the case in the annual death anniversary (urs) of Shah Hussein – or Madho Lal Hussein – a Punjab Sufi poet-saint who in his poems dedicated his love for his disciple and lover Madho Lal, literally fusing his name with his beloved one, which is not only a testament for the endurance of their love but which is also an illustration of a central component of Sufism – the merger of the lover and the beloved (Desai, 2016).

Westerners who travelled to the Muslim world in the 17th and 18th centuries were profoundly scandalized by (or admired) the apparent openness of sodomy and ‘sexual lasciviousness’ which they found in these regions. What is more, various well-known European writers of that era traveled to places like Morocco and Egypt in order to fulfill their inhibited and unfulfilled same-sex desires back at home, as they viewed the Muslim world as a sexual paradise for uninhibited, same-sex sensuality – something which is now viewed as “sex tourism” and which is still an ongoing practice of many Westerners who travel to Muslim countries (Erwing, 2011). The subject of sexuality in the Muslim world has historically been a very central topic in the Orientalist (artistic, literary, ‘scientific’) depictions of Muslim societies. This is for example evident in Western artistic depictions of the harem, where the artists, fueled by Orientalist fantasies, represented the harem as a world of sexual subjugation where women frequently lounged in suggestive poses, effectively objectifying and eroticizing the space for the European male gaze. European ignorant and prejudiced depictions of the Muslim world were almost always dependent on the Oriental myth, where the Orient is interpreted, perceived and represented as a timeless and exotic land of fantasy and adventure, but which still remains (sexually) backwards and uncivilized as opposed to the West. Over time, the Oriental myth developed into the perceived truth among the European public, thus validating and propagating the Oriental myth at the same time (Ali, 2015). Therefore, according to Erwing (2011), from “the vantage point of nineteenth-century Orientalist

representations of the sexuality of the Muslim, today's concern with the sexual intolerance of the Muslim immigrant is ironic. In the European colonial project, the Muslim was also a threatening other to Europe's civilizing influence, but for the opposite reason. For many European observers, the threat came from the debauchery of Muslim men who engaged in same-sex activities" (Erwing, 2011: 91). In Europe, there is a long history of constructing internal and external others in terms of their deviant and excessive sexuality, such as the uncontrolled sexuality of women, sodomy and hermaphroditism. The Crusades has also helped to construct stereotypes of Islam, linking it to various sexual practices considered as 'sexual crimes', such as sodomy and bestiality. Therefore, in Europe, Jews and Christians who practiced sodomy were considered to have learned that sexual behavior in places such as Egypt or Arab Spain, as it was seen as an inherently 'Muslim' or 'Turkish' vice (Ahmadi, 2012).

Explicit discussions of transgressive and deviant sexualities and bodies – such as hermaphrodites, polygamy, sodomy and bestiality – 'found' in the '(sexually) backwards' Arab and Muslim world led to the construction of the European heteronormative order where monogamous, heterosexual and complementary marriage comprised of a private domestic femininity and a public masculinity – also known as 'the heterosexual matrix' – becomes the highest stage of civilization as opposed to the unregulated sexuality and deviant masculinity and femininity found in the 'savage' 'uncivilized' Oriental world. This spatialization of normative and deviant bodies and sexualities is thus an inextricable dimension of the naturalization of the binary opposition of male and female bodily/sexual difference, which forms the basis of the western heterosexual matrix. This naturalized gender and sexual hierarchy formed of a male-female and heterosexual-homosexual dichotomous hierarchy is thus imperial from its inception and is always already imperial, as only by locating deviant bodies and sexualities *elsewhere* are normative bodies and sexualities placed in the West (Patil, 2018). The normalization of these reified categories and hierarchies is thus the result of historical processes which are closely linked to the colonial administration of social differentiation through sexual regulation, where identities were racially defined, labelled and hierarchized in a process of social differentiation based on essentialized categories of race, religion, tribe and caste. These categories in turn were reinforced and sustained through ideas of 'racial purity' and deviant sexualities, which also became legal principles both in the European metropolises and colonies, thus criminalizing such deviant bodies and sexualities (Erwing, 2011). This criminalization was also in turn the result of the pathologization and exclusion of such identity categories such as the 'woman', 'pedophile', 'homosexual' and 'prostitute' created in secular institutions of modern governmentality, such as medical sciences and psychiatry. As Foucault (1978) has argued, 'sexuality' as something that one "has" is a fairly recent invention of these institutions of modern governmentality in the late 19th century and early 20th century, where the articulation of 'normal' subjects who are fully included into the body politic – such as the 'white', 'male', 'heterosexual' – also implied the exclusion of the sexually deviants, becoming the basis for their pathologization, exclusion and criminalization. As Erwing (2011) argues, the creation of 'sexual deviance' and its exclusion from the body politic is thus closely related to colonial processes of rendering the bodies and sexualities of the colonized as 'racially inferior'. This social differentiation through sexual

regulation in turn also played a central role in the constitution of the European bourgeois subject, or the ‘normal’ subject who fully belongs to the body politic.

Homosexuality as a sexual category thus became not only criminalized, pathologized and excluded from the sexual citizenship in the European metropolises but also in the colonies, as part of the ‘civilizing’ process of the European imperialists and colonizers at a time when transnational imperial campaigns for moral (and racial) purity were at their peak (Erwing, 2011). In order to criminalize homosexual activity, sodomy laws were placed in the judicial system of the European empires in both metropolises and colonies. Sodomy laws are laws that define any sexual act deemed to be ‘unnatural’ or ‘immoral’ as crimes, including such sexual acts as anal sex, oral sex and bestiality. However, in practice, sodomy laws have been rarely enforced against heterosexuals but were instead mostly used to target homosexuals. Especially in the British Empire, sodomy laws were imposed on the colonies in an undemocratic fashion, reflecting the British Judeo-Christian and puritan values of the time. Victorian puritan moral constructs, negative views on sex and the outright condemnation and punishment of deviant sexualities in favor of upholding heteronormative norms were part of these ‘Judeo-Christian values’ which influenced the penal codes in nations where Islam was practiced, such as India, Bangladesh and Pakistan, which were imposed by British and other European nations’ colonial rule. In exerting their power, European imperialists – and especially the British – believed that these laws could forcefully impose European morality into the resistant “native” masses and cultures and re-educate them mandatorily into European sexual mores – i.e. “civilizing” them – as the native cultures did not punish ‘deviant’ sex enough or not at all. These penal laws and moral constructs thus didn’t reflect the cultural attitudes towards sexuality and same-sex sexual activities through Islamic history, as in many Muslim countries, regions and cultures, homosexuality was tolerated and at times even celebrated (Ahmadi, 2012). Unfortunately, former British colonies are far more likely to still have these sodomy laws in place than the former colonies of other European states or other states in general, showing how British colonial legacy of the criminalization and stigmatization of homosexuality is still persistent around the world. As of 2018, of the 72 countries that still have sodomy laws in their judicial system, at least 38 inherited these laws from British colonial rule (Han & O’Mahoney, 2018).

Colonial legacy and neo-imperialist connections

Western imperialist incursions in the Middle East and the larger Muslim world thus coincided with an increasing stigma against homosexuality, homosexuality now being understood as a particular type of person and a sexual category of deviance. The imposition of the Western ‘heterosexual matrix’ in the Muslim world through laws and education destroyed the sexual order of Muslim communities and cultures which were more permissive of same-sex sexual activities without necessarily labelling or stigmatizing its practitioners. Together with the destruction of the kinship-based community arising from the emergence of capitalism and (male) wage-work labor through Western colonialism, the imposition of Western sexual mores in the Muslim world reinforced the patriarchal, heterosexual family unit. This change in community structure and the imposition of Western sexual mores thus largely created the contemporary taboo and stigmatization against homosexuality in many Muslim societies

(Kligerman, 2007). As Dunne (1998) argues, “hostility to homosexual practices has been a part of the political and cultural legacy of European colonialism” (1998: 11). After the proclamation of independence of former colonies and the end of the colonial era, there were religious revival movements in many of these Muslim-majority and Arab countries and states were formed and connected directly to the clergy. Consequently, societal discussions and issues moved from the culture directly into the religious institutions, thus influencing Islamic law (Shari’a), which is considered to be a relatively recent and modern phenomenon in the history of Islam. This modern phenomenon is still ongoing and the authorities of these religious institutions are mainly religious conservatives who speak in the name of “Islam”, thus imposing their interpretation of Islam and Shari’a on Muslims in general and on LGBT Muslims specifically. The views and prescriptions of sexual behavior according to these conservative (religious) authorities also bear the legacy of European imperial influence (Ahmadi, 2012).

If criminalization of homosexuality was not imposed through colonial laws and education, it was – and still is – due to European (cultural) imperial influence throughout the world. For example, as Iranian elites came into contact with European elites who held widely held homosocial (such as men holding hands and kissing in public) and homosexual practices to be abominable and disgusting, their response was to accept this European critique and acting upon it through heteronormalizing Iranian society, which in turn paved the way for later institutionalization of homophobia. This transformation of gender relations in Iranian society into heteronormative gender relations with strict defined gender and sexual roles, which, in part, is due to European cultural imperial influence in the country, became a marker of modernity by the late 19th century. This institutionalization of heteronormativity is part of the wider – and still ongoing – European imperial history in which Western actors have allocated the power to define the content of modernity to themselves, leading to the widely held belief that being modern means to become like the West thus erasing and marginalizing other alternative ways of historical development (Rao, 2015). However, in the second half of the twentieth century, there was a shift in the nature of the Western secular subject: due to the growing secularism and the advent of the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s such as the gay liberation movement, the second wave feminist movement and the sexual revolution, the Western subject became a secular sexual subject free from religious and traditional pressures. Furthermore, with the mainstreaming of the gay rights movement and the rise of the homonormative subject which became embedded in the “sexual citizenship” of some Western countries towards the end of the 20th century and beginning of the 21st century, representations of Muslims and (homo)sexuality changed drastically. While during the colonial period, the Oriental world lagged behind the West because of its “mysterious” nature and its deviant libertine sexuality, today’s “Muslim world” in contrast lags behind the West because of its lack of secularism and its sexual constraints wrongly associated with tradition and Islam in general (Sabsay, 2012).

With the advent of the Western homonormative subject and the Gay International, not only was there a shift in representation of the Muslim world but also of the Western world and homosexuality as viewed from the perspective of many Muslims. Nowadays, many

(conservative) Muslims and religious/state authorities of many Muslim countries – not just only Islamist fundamentalists – view homosexuality and demands for LGBTQ+ rights as a byproduct of increased Westernization and Western neo-imperial influence. Especially with the rising influence and interventionism of Western Islamophobic gay rights organizations and neo-imperial Western human rights abuses and other aggressions in the Muslim world often in the name of democracy and LGBT/women’s rights, this view of homosexuality and LGBT rights as a Western invention or as Western (cultural) neo-imperialism has been strengthened (Massad, 2002). This view can be for example represented by the Iranian president in 2007, Ahmadinejad, who in his visit to Columbia University in New York, United States, proclaimed that: “In Iran, we don’t have homosexuals. In Iran we don’t have this phenomenon. I don’t know who has told you we have it”. Official attitudes in the region deny the existence of homosexuals or may concede the existence of a few gay people, however claiming that they are the victims of western influence as homosexuality is a “foreign” phenomenon (Whitaker, 2007). Because of the prevalence of this view, many authorities in Muslim countries nowadays are not concerned with protecting the rights of the gay minority. Quite to the contrary, there has been an enormous backlash against LGBT rights and people in many Muslim-majority countries and former colonies, as it is perceived as a form of western neo-colonial influence. The improvement for the situation of LGBT people in these countries is rendered even more difficult due to the presence of European and American gay converts to Islam who believe that Muslims will be more tolerant of their sexual identity. As this Western homosexual minority demands equality, many Muslim people view gays increasingly as ‘arrogant’ and demanding more rights than the heterosexual majority. Furthermore, many Western gay sex tourists still continue to seek (paid) sexual satisfaction in places such as North Africa and Kenya, also leading many local people to view gays as overindulgent, lascivious and morally fraught and as people who spread disease, a view that is strengthened by homophobic media coverage about homosexuals in both the West and East. These phenomena serve to increase prejudices and resentment against gays among many Muslims, thus rendering progress for LGBT rights and acceptance of homosexuality in many Muslim communities more difficult (Kligerman, 2007). This anti-gay rhetoric is also part of still ongoing nationalist struggles and projects against imperialism in the Muslim and Arab world, in which the state emerges as a masculinized protector against imperialism but at the same time alienates some minorities and social justice struggles such as gays and the feminist movement as nothing more than just agents of Western sabotage (Habib, 2010).

Homosexuality and Islamic theology

Mainstream views about homosexuality in Islam

In order to further understand contemporary attitudes of Muslims towards homosexuality, there is a need to carefully examine mainstream and alternative interpretations of the Quran because of the significant impact that religion has on practitioners’ understanding of homosexuality. This is done in order to demonstrate that the contemporaneous widely held belief in the West that homophobia is an inextricable part of and/or unique to Islam is an oversimplification, as Islam as such is a very diverse and complex religious tradition with a

very diverse set of practitioners and homophobia is also present in many other religious communities, showing that homophobia is not unique to or inseparable from Islam. This is also done in order to (re)accommodate and (re)accept the coexistence of non-heterosexual Muslims within Islam, as cosmetic reforms such as just rhetorically condemning (extrajudicial) violence against queer people and/or insisting on respect for the public secular legal framework in secular countries where the rights of religious and sexual minorities are recognized and where Muslims reside are insufficient to address the problems which many non-heterosexual Muslims face within their communities and with themselves. These cosmetic reforms are insufficient as still many Muslim scholars and authorities still do not accept or refuse to even consider the possibility of accommodating non-heterosexuals within Islam, and when their condemnation of homosexuality may legitimize violence against queer Muslims, be it from the part of the state or not (Shah; 2016). Many queer Muslims are forced to repress their sexual identities and sexual and/or romantic same-sex desires if they wish to stay within their own religious community or are forced to abandon their own community, families and friends – but not necessarily their religion as they often form their own supportive religious community – if they wish to live their own identities and desires freely, as often they are not provided a religious ethical framework which is acceptant or even tolerant of their own existence within Islam (Ahmadi, 2012).

Just to suggest that LGBTQ+ Muslims' attempts at reconciling religious faith with same-sex sexual/romantic desires and identities is senseless, impossible or even heretic as they will never be accepted within Muslim communities, is endangering for both the well-being of LGBTQ+ Muslims and the legitimacy and vitality of Islamic tradition. Not only because of human rights concerns and reproaches from the international community but also because of the *takfir* (excommunication) plague which is so disastrous to many Muslim communities (Mahomed, 2016). However, to attribute such phenomena to Islam as such is a gross oversimplification. As Habib (2010) argues, “separate from the people who practice it, Islam is neither condemnatory nor forgiving, neither restrictive nor liberationist” (2010: 41). Islam, as any other religion, is shaped by the cultural context, as well as other factors such as socioeconomic, geographical, political and historical states of such cultures, and by the interpretative context of Islam which becomes institutionalized over the centuries and which becomes disseminated in the form of media and education which propagates these interpretations and teachings among Muslims (Habib, 2010). Therefore, the traditionalist point of view that Islam monolithically condemns homosexuality is erroneous, as Islam does no such thing, but Muslims may.

In Islam, Muslims are provided with a complete way of life in the form of scriptures. The two most important scriptures in Islam are the Quran, which is regarded to be the transcendent and revelatory truth held by Muslims to be the infallible word of Allah (God) as orally revealed to Prophet Mohammed, and the Hadith, which are traditions based on reports of the sayings and life of Prophet Mohammed and his companions but which were compiled after his death, which is why the various Islamic schools attribute different levels of importance (or no importance at all) to Hadith as such. Although the Quran doesn't make explicit references to homosexuality and homosexual identity as it is understood today, many conservative Muslim

scholars, leaders and practitioners repeatedly refer to the holy book and the *hadith* in order to condemn and even punish homosexuals. Many mainstream Muslim scholars fervently defend heteronormativity with moral and religious arguments, often arguing that Islam condemns homosexuality even more undeniably than Judaism and Christianity (Kligerman, 2007). The most cited passage that these scholars use in order to condemn homosexuality stems from the Quran (2011) and God's divine punishment of the people of Lot, which also features in Christianity and Judaism in God's punishment of Sodom and Gomorrah, and is addressed through the following verses:

We also (sent) Lut: He said to his people: 'Do ye commit lewdness such as no people in creation (ever) committed before you?' 'For ye practise your lusts on men in preference to women: ye are indeed a people transgressing beyond bounds'. And his people gave no answer but this: they said, 'drive them out of your city: these are indeed men who want to be clean and pure!' But we saved him and his family, except his wife: she was of those who lagged behind. And we rained down on them a shower (of brimstone): Then see what was the end of those who indulged in sin and crime! (Quran, 2011: 80–84)

There are many interpretations to this passage and confusion often arises over the meaning of the passage. However most mainstream Muslim scholars, legalists and jurists agree that this passage shows that the Quran explicitly condemns same-sex sexual acts (sodomy) and thus – by extension – condemns homosexuality in general. In the mainstream traditional interpretation of this passage, the story of Lot tells how Prophet Lot was sent by Allah to warn the people against the danger of same-sex sexual acts, but as his warnings were ignored much of the population was punished and eradicated by Allah through a shower of brimstone. Emanating from this passage is the belief that homosexuality is an aberration and highly undesirable in Islam. Many scholars also infer from this passage that homosexuality should be punished and that the death penalty should be imposed on those guilty of performing same-sex sexual acts, based on the last section of the passage ('we rained down on them a shower of brimstone'). Although the Quran is actually unclear about the punishment of homosexual acts, the Hadith is much clearer on the punishment which should be imposed on people committing sodomy. However, as previously said, the different schools of Islamic law (Sharia) attribute different importance to the Hadith. The Hanbali School is for example the most severe in its punishment, recommending death by stoning to people committing sodomy. The Hanafi School however doesn't prescribe punishment as the act of sodomy is not the same as adultery (Jamal, 2001).

Alternative interpretations of Islam and homosexuality

In recent years, the increased visibility of LGBTQ+ Muslims has been increasingly supported through a new re-interpretative analysis of the sacred texts which have been used to condemn and punish homosexuality. Some LGBTQ+ Muslims have been active in reinterpreting Islam in order to advocate more inclusive interpretations of the religion which put notions of equality, diversity and social justice at the center. Some Islamic scholars as well have been increasingly vocal in their claim to provide theological accommodation to LGBTQ+ Muslims, as they perceive that the Lot story has been generally interpreted in an orthodox and legalistic

way, without taking into consideration contextual factors of the story both in history and in the Quran (Shah, 2016). For example, Scott Siraj Al-Haq Kugle (2010), who is a scholar of South Asian and Islamic Studies and who is also Muslim and openly gay, argues that the Quran does not refer to ‘homosexuality’ as it is currently understood, but refers to anal penetrative sexual acts between men (sodomy) instead, thus not saying anything about the intention, sexual orientation nor the inner disposition of the person performing the act. The story of Lot thus focuses more on the act of anal penetration from male to male instead of the myriad of other sexual and romantic desires between people of the same sex, thus debunking the erroneous analogy of many contemporary Muslim legal scholars who use anal intercourse between men as a synonym for ‘homosexuality’ instead of understanding ‘homosexuality’ in its broader sense. Furthermore, he argues that the story of Prophet Lot in the Quran does not declare that the people were destroyed because of the particular act of sodomy. Rather, he argues that this story is about infidelity to Allah through inhospitality, greed and sexual oppression rather than particular sexual acts or any particular sexual orientation (Kugle, 2010). Similarly, Vaid (2016) looks at the context of forced or coerced sex (rape) and the rejection of Prophet Lot’s message as the features of this story and as the possible causes of divine punishment.

The use of the Quran to both attack and legitimize the condemnation of homosexuality shows how Islam – and religion in general – can be a ‘cultural resource’. Islam can be used as a cultural resource to legitimize anti-LGBTQ+ violence and homophobia, as was the case with Orlando shooter, Omar Mateen, who carried out one of the deadliest single-shooter mass killing in US history at the gay club Pulse in 2016 in the name of Islam and ISIS. Even though most mainstream Muslim authorities disapprove of Mateen’s action as he took punishment against LGBTQ+ people into his own hands without the approval of religious authorities, these leaders mostly agree that homosexual behavior is sinful. However, Islam can also be used to support and provide accommodation to LGBTQ+ Muslims, as is the case with Kugle’s pro-LGBTQ+ hermeneutics of Islam, whereby he advocates more inclusive interpretations of Islam where notions such as equality, diversity and social justice – which are all central tenets of Islamic tradition – are central (Shah, 2016). The use of Islam as a ‘cultural resource’ also reveals how this religion – as well as all other religions – is a ‘discursive tradition’ composed of practices, texts, institutions and communities which create a constantly changing set of socially embodied arguments passed from generation to generation. These socially embodied arguments however become redefined through two types of conflict: either from external critics of the tradition who reject all or aspects of the tradition and from internal critics of the tradition, who through internal interpretative debates come to redefine meanings and rationales of fundamental agreements of the tradition (Anjum, 2007). The use of Islam as a cultural resource for the legitimization of same-sex sexual conduct is an example of internal interpretative debate rather than critics external to the tradition. The understanding of Islam as a cultural resource and as a discursive tradition also reveals how there are no ‘true’, ‘authentic’ or ‘objective’ interpretations of Islam but how these are socially constructed through historical, social and political contexts and factors and how these interpretations serve a specific goal (Mahomed, 2016).

LGBTQ+ Muslims: theoretically queer intersectional identities

Regardless of whether Islam is accepting of homosexuality or considers it as a crime, the fact that gay and lesbian Muslims exist demonstrates that their lived experience challenge what is commonly understood as ‘gay’ and ‘Muslim’ as uniform and mutually exclusive identities. These identities, when considered from a singular perspective, are often considered to be opposite from each other, as ‘gay’ stands out as being white, western and secular and ‘Muslim’ as eastern, traditional, conservative and heterosexist. However, gay and lesbian Muslims are at the intersection between these two identities and through their existence as queer subjects they negotiate their ontological difference from the dominant understandings of these supposed ‘coherent’ identities, thus disrupting, challenging and reformulating these established identity categories. In order to analyze the individual experiences of gay and lesbian Muslims, an intersectional framework must be applied so that they can be viewed from multiple perspectives in how they are discriminated both within the Muslim community and by those outside of the Muslim community (Rahman, 2010). The concept of intersectionality examines how systems of oppression and discrimination based on separate social categories such as race, gender, class, religion and sexuality interact with each other in order to create complex forms of inequality in society. Intersectionality has its roots in Critical Race Theory and black radical feminism and feminists such as Kimberlé Crenshaw and Patricia Hill Collins, who asserted that systems of oppression based on the social categories of race, class and gender interact in order to create unique experiences of oppression that are overlooked when addressed separately. They did this in order to criticize the mainstream white feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s, as they argue that the oppression experienced by white middle-class women – which were the central figures of the mainstream feminist movement – wasn’t the same as the oppression experienced by black women or poor women. Even though the concept of intersectionality was originally intended to address the experiences of poor black women and thus to examine the intersections between race, gender and class, it quickly became a frequently used analytical tool in Critical Race Theory and came to encompass and examine other social categories and identities such as disability and sexuality (Ahmadi, 2012).

Using intersectionality as an analytical tool is thus also beneficial for examining the experiences of gay and lesbian Muslims who are at the intersection of multiple oppressions based on the social categories of religious/ethnic affiliation, sexuality and possibly also other social categories such as gender, class and disability. Multiple systems of oppression such as heterosexism, patriarchy, cultural views on religion and colonialism interact with each other in order to create their unique experiences of oppression and continue to influence beliefs and behaviors towards gay and lesbian Muslims, which have been institutionalized to marginalize them and sustain those in power (Ahmadi, 2012). The intersectional locations of these gay and lesbian Muslims are unique in that they represent ‘impossible’, ‘unviable’ or at least ‘dubious’ subjects. Rahman (2010) calls the identities of these gay and lesbian Muslims as “theoretically queer intersectional identities”, as for conservative Muslims a *queer* Muslim becomes an unviable subject, and for some in the queer community – and especially for Western Islamophobic gay rights activists and leaders like the aforementioned Pim Fortuyn – a queer *Muslim* is an impossible, if not dubious, subject. Therefore, the exposure of the

existence of these ‘impossible’ of these gay and lesbian Muslim subjects challenges and deconstructs many binary oppositions and universalisms in identity categories. One of such binary oppositions is the apparent opposition between Muslim cultures and gender or sexual equality. Since gay and lesbian Muslims exist, the cultural opposition thesis that is featured in the ‘clash of civilizations’ discourse as explained in the beginning of this paper is fundamentally challenged, as their intersectional identities demonstrate that cultures and identities are plural and overlapping rather than monolithic and mutually exclusive. In other words, the social construction of gay and lesbian Muslims exposes the inconsistencies of the apparently monolithic and oppositional cultures of East and West by challenging western cultural version of gay identities as the only way of understanding homosexuality and by challenging conservative Muslim views of sexuality. Since intersectional analysis draws attention to the standpoint of the oppressed – precisely because it acknowledges that authoritative knowledge often excludes marginalized oppressed groups – the knowledge and points of view of the marginalized gay and lesbian Muslim community presents a fundamental challenge to dominant established paradigms, as is the case in queer-friendly interpretations of Islam discussed in the last section, which accommodates sexual diversity within Islam through notions of respect, social justice, equality and diversity. The acknowledgment of their intersectional position also has implications for political action and remedies, as the rejection of universalist or essentialist positions through attention to the lived experiences and standpoint of the oppressed leads to better policies that tackle the oppression of marginalized communities (Rahman, 2010).

Conclusion

In the influential ‘clash of civilizations’ discourse, culture is described in an almost totalizing and fixed way, whereby humans have no agency and are totally defined by their culture, treating it as an explanation for everything they say and do (Philips, 2007). This discourse, together with other Orientalizing discourses, treats Islam and Muslims as inherently traditional, conservative, backwards and violent as opposed to the modern, secular and progressive West. The Orientalist view in which the West stands in total opposition to the Orient cannot be sustained when culture is placed in its social context. Islam is a complex religion which is in constant flux because of various social, political and historical factors and contexts. Muslims’ perceptions of homosexuality have changed according to several factors internal and external to their communities, societies and cultures. Western colonialism and imperialism has imposed or coerced a Western heteronormative sexual order on Muslim societies and its legacy is still felt until today. Gay Imperialism and homonationalism have also had a detrimental effect on the perceptions of Muslims towards homosexuality. An appreciation of Muslim cultures and their different interpretations of Islam and the intersectional positions of LGBTQ+ Muslims may shed a light on the complex and dynamic relationship between Islam and homosexuality.

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