SALZBURG GLOBAL LGBT* FORUM:
FAITH IS...?

October 20, 2020

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*LGBT: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender. We are using this term as it is currently widely used in human rights conversations on sexual orientation and gender identity in many parts of the world, and we would wish it to be read as inclusive of other cultural concepts, contemporary or historical, to express sexuality and gender, intersex and gender non-conforming identities.

INTRODUCTION
Since the beginning of August, we have published weekly blogs from Fellows of the Global Online Forum on LGBT* and Faith, focusing on two leading questions:

- What is needed for religious communities and leaders to be instrumental in promoting the wellbeing, equality, and inclusion of LGBT people in faith communities and society?
- How do LGBT people, today and throughout history, enrich and change the religious communities of which they are a part?

The blogs are posted on the Facebook page of Salzburg Global and generated comments there, as well as on other social media platforms where they were shared by our Fellows. Our partner ILGA ASIA republished the series on their Facebook page. Readers can also subscribe to our newsletter to be alerted to each new blog.

Klaus Mueller, Founder and Chair of the Salzburg Global LGBT* Forum, introduced the goals of our new program initiative on LGBT and Faith. This year’s Global Online Forum on LGBT* and Faith strives to document that a respectful, humane and global conversation on LGBT equality and inclusion in and across faith communities is not only possible, but indeed has already begun in many places. By bridging divides, the Salzburg Global LGBT* Forum aims to strengthen inclusive cooperation between religious and LGBT
leaders, and their communities, and to expand global connections, supporting the next generation of LGBT leaders. Outcomes will also serve as a roadmap for our continuing work on the Faith is...? Initiative.

Through our social media blog series the Salzburg Global LGBT* Forum is developing a space for reflection and gives visibility to voices of established and emerging leaders. Our second online meeting allowed Forum Fellows to connect from around the world and reflect on the most recent blog posts written by their peers. The convening focused on Personal Journeys, and our panel of five blog authors discussed how their personal journeys shaped the work they do today and what they have learned about themselves, faith, and dueling identities. These reflections provided key themes for our breakout discussions on inclusive approaches.

This word cloud depicts the key words and themes from the blogs posted since August 2020. The visualization offers a point of reflection for our fellows of the most relevant topics strengthening LGBT inclusion within faith communities.

**FELLOWS’ PERSPECTIVES**

Five personal journeys and experiences framed our conversation on the challenges faced guided by the question: What do you envision, informed by your personal journeys, as essential to reach LGBT inclusion in faith communities?

*Fr. Thomas Ninan*, general coordinator of the ESHA Project of the Christian Service Agency in India, wrote a blog post entitled, “*I Started To Ask Myself. What Is Stopping Me From Genuinely Loving LGBT People?*” In this piece, he describes his journey of acceptance as an Indian Orthodox priest. He recognizes that pre-existing prejudice creates barriers for many individuals making it difficult for them to open their
hearts and minds. Scriptures, church traditions, structural influences have placed external pressures and shaped how some faith communities view LGBT individuals. Fr. Thomas realized that loving is an essential part of his being and faith and that he must put that love into practice. As a part of the National Council of Churches in India (NCCI), which brings together Protestant and Orthodox Churches as well as ecumenical organizations, regional councils and agencies, representing about 14 million people in India, Fr. Thomas has been working to produce the structural changes that are necessary to foster inclusion. During their 2018 Declaration on Interfaith Engagement with Human Sexuality and Gender Diversity, the NCCI emphasized the “innate ability of each faith community to understand, accept and celebrate gender, sexual and sexuality identities.” This declaration was the result of engagement with different faith communities, faith leaders and LGBT individuals from different faith backgrounds. While some faith communities in India have a notion and perception that sexual orientation and gender identity are Western concepts, and foreign to India, Fr. Thomas explained that on the contrary, Indians had their own way of understanding gender diversities and fluidity before colonial systems were forced upon them, as evident in many temples, sculptures and narratives throughout the country. This heritage can be explored and celebrated today. Yet, transformation to inclusion can be a long and slow journey, and is in need of continuous dialogue: “We focused on creating a safe space for conversations to happen, where we could listen to life stories. We don’t start with the scriptures, we start with the realities. The NCCI encouraged the re-visiting of the scriptures and looking at it with a human rights perspective.”

Rev. Ecclesia de Lange, director of Inclusive and Affirming Ministries (IAM) in South Africa, entitled her blog post, “I Lived in Denial of Who I Am and I Settled for a Life of Celibacy and Secrecy.” Rev. Ecclesia reflects on her long journey from being suspended as a Methodist minister for her LGBT identity, to finding love and acceptance within herself and her community, to actively advocating for LGBT acceptance within faith spheres. As a leader of Inclusive and Affirming Ministries (IAM), Rev. Ecclesia works closely with clergy and faith communities by introducing and providing training on issues around contextual bible reading and study, integrating sexuality, spirituality, sexual orientation and gender identity. IAM works in three stages towards LGBT inclusion in faith communities: ready-making, opening of minds, and advocacy. By offering targeted education to each of these stages, they promote LGBT inclusion across communities. During our discussion, Rev. Ecclesia further developed how her personal journey allows her to understand the perspective of those who deny and exclude LGBT persons. During her upbringing, she was part of an anti-gay movement that affirmed homosexuality as a sin. In her own struggle and process of accepting herself and her LGBT identity, she had to first forgive herself for rejecting who God made her to be. She stated, “I embraced who I am and the new theology and creative/ongoing learning process because I still understand where people are. I know there is a process of transformation. It’s easier for me to stand in that position knowing that you can’t flip a switch to get people to the other side, it’s a process.” The patience she held for herself is the same patience she has for others as they begin to loosen their grip on long standing beliefs of what they believe God to be and what they believe to be the truth. Sustainable transformation will take time in order for a true impact to be seen. She continued with, “When we feel impatient, and people disregard our identities and our
right to love and acceptance, we recognize that these people are on their own journeys. We will gently plot along and sow the seeds of transformation, and one day, the penny will drop.”

Saskia Wieringa, renowned anthropologist and professor at the University of Amsterdam in the Netherlands, wrote a blog post reflecting on her own personal journey through three different religions. The blog post, entitled “All Religions Have Their Progressive, Human Rights-Oriented Sides,” depicts her faith landscape through Protestantism/Christianity, Buddhism, and Islam with bits of Hinduism throughout. Feeling lost in the strict constrains and expectations placed on her by her Protestant upbringing, she began searching for anthropological materials on gender diversity, transgender practices, and same-sex relations across the world, many of which she found in India within Hinduism. She continued her exploration and found further examples in Africa and Indonesia and began publishing books and articles on these themes. Along our personal journeys, Saskia highlighted that for her there are certain transformations that are necessary to find inclusion: self-empowerment, self-acceptance, and knowing that we are not alone. Before Christianity and Islam in Indonesia, as well as many other countries, there was “a long tradition of transgender healers, of multiple genders, of having gender diversity, or gender inclusion and transformation. It’s important to know that history because that history is empowering.” LGBT people can find inspiration in their heritage and historical examples of previous inclusion. The importance of collecting and telling stories has always been a core part of Saskia’s mission, and she made it her task to preserve and share these rich stories of gender diversity, gender fluidity, and gender inclusion documented in the history of many faith communities. Finding allies in today’s world is another key component of instituting change in society. Saskia explains that, “In Indonesia, we have two kinds of major allies including liberal theologians, both from Protestant and Catholic faiths, and the Liberal Islamic Network where scholars eloquently argue how Islam can be inclusive of human, women’s, and sexual rights. ”The fight for LGBT inclusion is not just theological but also political. Conservative groups use connections to the military and large conglomerates for money, power, and influence. To break through these power networks, LGBT people of Faith must find such allies.

Brenda Rodriguez Alegre, member of the Board of Directors of The Society of Transsexual Women Advocates of the Philippines (STRAP) and Southeast Asia representative of ILGA Asia, is based in Hong Kong and entitled her blog post, “As a Child I Would Pray to God ’to Make Me a Woman One Day.’” As an academic, activist, and expert of Filipino transgender history, Brenda uses her blog as an encouragement to Filipino queers to claim their history. The Philippines’ history of colonization has introduced, and later reinforced, Christianity: “Much as our culture has been shaped by this colonization experience, colonization also meant being gendered through and through such as being given gendered names and clothes and preferences. Even our futures were and are gendered.”Before the introduction of Christianity, it is possible to assume that a binary gender system did not exist. Genders and sexualities were vague, pluralist, transgressive or transcendent. After the erasure of queerness from Filipino culture due to the effects of colonization, a recent resurgence in queer visibility entered society in the 1940s and again in the early 2000s. Queer individuals have remained resilient and fluid in spite of being denied opportunities as well as facing ostracization and violence. They continued to fight against cultural stigmatization, discrimination and lack of recognition by
their communities. During our discussion, Brenda expanded on the effects of these struggles. For many, churches are systems of support and comfort but LGBT individuals cannot find the same unconditional love in these institutions. The Catholic church insists that they do not reject the sinner, only the sin, but what the church refers to as “sin” are LGBT people’s lives, their way of expressing themselves and their journeys. By living life truly and finding self-acceptance and love, LGBT people remain sinners in the eyes of the church. The LGBT community has learned to support each other to cope with this rejection. This is why Brenda states that, “I still believe in God although now I am not trapped in the idea that our God is cisgender, straight, white and from Europe. He could come from anywhere, look like anyone, and is genderless. However, it is not exactly this faith that keeps me optimistic for a bright future as a transpinay. It is seeing others like me accept themselves and live their lives as if there is nothing painful surrounding our existence. I am inspired by my fellow transpinays and queer people.”

Tashi Choedup, resident Sangha member at the Root Institute for Wisdom and Culture in India, wrote a blog post entitled, “My Faith Has Helped Me With My Queerness and My Queerness Helps Me In Making My Faith Inclusive.” As a Buddhist monastic, Tashi shares their journey of forging healthy relationships between their queerness and their faith: “The novice vows I keep are the same for monks and nuns and to assert my non-binary gender identity I use the word ‘monastic’ for myself. And ‘they/them’ as pronouns.” Tashi’s upbringing was embedded within the Hindu faith: “I knew it was religion that gave me my first foothold to my faith, but I innately felt that religion wasn’t the source of my faith.” During our discussion, Tashi explained, “I refuse to give this ultimate monopoly that religion assumes to have on our faith. As much as I’m part of a religious order, as much as I am a monastic in a particular religion, I believe my faith is still independent of any religion.” LGBT individuals can find comfort and acceptance in the fact that they do not have to cast out their faith because a specific religious institution does not accept them. They can continue to develop and nourish their faith and try to find others to share with. By exploring Christianity and Buddhism, Tashi’s journey continued on the path of learning, self-acceptance, and love. By intertwining their queerness with Buddhism, Tashi has found that these groups are non-exclusory. They can be non-binary and queer while also committing themselves to their faith and belief system. Recently, Tashi has witnessed Buddhist teachers engaging more with issues of gender and sexuality and queer Buddhists are forming healthy connections between their queerness and their Buddhist faith on an individual and collective level. Tashi is feeling inspired and hopeful that these conversations are igniting change.

Gurchaten Sandu, the programme support officer of United Nation’s International Labour Organization (ILO), served as commentator. Being part of the Sikh faith community, he reflected the speakers focus on transformation and the need to be patient with ourselves and others. The idea of forgiving ourselves for rejecting who God made us to be struck a chord for him and befits the need for transformation with compassion. Gurchaten emphasized that we cannot force people to change their belief system stating that we all indeed know how it feels to be forced in one particular direction. In his view, we need to work slowly so that the transformation happens organically: Dialogue flourishes in safe spaces where people can learn and engage. Gurchaten also identified that LGBT people still face challenges on the ritualistic side of
religion, and their lives and loves being labelled as a sin. When places of worship reject LGBT people of faith, they are rejecting who we are and how we express ourselves. Gurchen reflected on Tashi’s blog post highlighting that he also feels that, “we must distinguish between what faith is and what religion is. Faith is the basis of religion to exist and not the other way around.” As fellows shared their work in these fields globally, many stated that change is happening - but very slowly.

**REFLECTIONS FROM OUR BREAKOUT GROUPS: WHAT ARE EMERGING THEMES?**

During our breakout groups, we reflected on emerging themes that the panel discussion helped to accentuate, but also used the space to know each other better. Some of these themes were shared with the group as a whole afterwards:

- **Faith and Change:** Fellows highlighted the importance of remembering that all religions go through phases. Ian Southey-Swartz shared that his group concurred that, “When a religion feels that ‘all has been revealed’, and that it is certain of the truth’ rather than an idea, it becomes closed to critical thinking. Faith itself is a process of learning and therefore it can change.” In settings where religion, culture and traditions reinforce each other, it is important that we understand that these factors are dynamic and ever-changing. A religion needs to grow with its people and a changing world. Patriarchy is rooted in most religions, resisting change, upholding strict gender binary and excluding LGBT communities from society. Confronting patriarchy is a key component of strengthening LGBT inclusion within faith communities. Not to forget: There are always allies who can help build bridges. Allies can be advocates on the political, economic, social, and cultural stages, transmitting LGBT voices to those who refuse to listen to them directly.

- **Self-Acceptance:** Highlighting LGBT experiences to transmit the expertise gained with challenges overcome on the path toward self-acceptance is important. The personal experiences of LGBT individuals are powerful and remain a core of queer theology. Tashi Choedup added that LGBT individuals need to be encouraged to find self-acceptance within both their LGBT and religious identities. Queer people are not coming from outside of mainstream religion but grow up within and are an integral part of religious communities.

- **Sharing Our Stories:** Sharing LGBT life stories in conversations can inspire change in faith communities. Brenda Rodriguez Alegre affirmed that, “In order for us to be present in the conversations, we should build skills and confidence as well as educate LGBT people so that they can be engaged in the process and conversation.” Through sharing personal stories and lived experiences, LGBT experiences no longer can be denied and seen as foreign or as an outside invasion. Fellows stressed the power of personal narratives – to guide one’s own journey, to encourage and nurture empathy and inclusion.
• **Inclusive Readings:** Fellows discussed the necessity to contextualize and interpret religious scriptures, texts, and histories. Decolonizing and deconstructing doctrines that restrict LGBT persons within faith traditions or even expel them from their faith community form an important step to come to inclusive readings of religious texts. How can we foster inclusion in religious communities? Fellows identified the “movable middle” in faith communities as the group of individuals who might be more open to dialogue and supporting LGBT inclusion into their system of belief. One aspect of this exploration for many includes confronting what we have been taught since childhood to redefine what our faith means to us. Lebohang Matela reminded us that religious leaders often do not understand human sexuality and look at it through lenses that reinforce what they are already thinking. It is hard for them to consider that “their truths” are not necessarily true. Providing inclusive readings of religious texts can help bridge and ease these conversations.

• **Empathy, and the limits of conversations:** Listening and empathy are key in transformation processes. It is important to understand where members of faith communities are in their own journeys. Fellows from different faith communities shared that this process is complex and requires patience. They exchanged about the need to allow time for change. **SLOW** was a word that was used often. Do we talk about years, or even decades? What do we do when we are threatened? Joy Ladin described this tension: “We need to live in the tension between getting high level strategies for transformation of religious institutions with empathic understanding and focusing on how we help people connect in love, which is the core of every religious tradition.” Ian Southey-Swartz raised the challenge of remaining empathetic when facing contempt. Ahmed El Hady rejected a notion of empathy in an environment where LGBT people are threatened with violence and torture and pointed out that those inclusive dialogues in many countries cannot be held as LGBT lives are criminalized. Scot Sherman shared that listening to LGBT life stories coming out of the midst of faith communities changed his understanding on queer people in faith communities: in his view, sharing personal narratives creates a disruptive empathy that nurtures new understanding. While some fellows emphasized that change needs time to be sustainable and substantial, others reminded us that in many countries LGBT people are confronted with and persecuted by religious dogma. When do we leave the conversation? When we are regarded as sub-human? When we need to secure our safety? Jayne Ozanne echoed the point that safeguarding LGBT people in different cultures and contexts needs to be our primary focus.
UP NEXT

Moving forward, our blog series will continue with a new posting each week and we encourage our Fellows to share these posts widely, engage with each other and be involved in the conversation. The final convening of our Global Online Forum on LGBT* and Faith in 2020 will take place on November 24, 2020 at 14:00 CET. This convening will take the form of a public webinar and we encourage our fellows to share this event widely within their circles so that all interested parties can join the discussion on the inclusion of LGBT* people in faith communities and religious and cultural traditions. The guiding questions and lead themes that have been integral to our conversations will serve as a guide for the discussion. Registration is required for this public webinar and can be accessed here. For more information, please also subscribe to our newsletter!

Finally, Saskia Wieringa left us with her reflection: “In Indonesia I fight against homophobia and in Holland I fight against Islamophobia. Knowing that these struggles are present all around the world and that everyone is doing whatever they can, it feels like I am part of a community and it feels good to not feel so alone anymore.”

Last, not least here is our group photos of all Fellows who participated in today’s conversation: