SALZBURG GLOBAL LGBT* FORUM
LGBT* and Faith:
How Can We Advance Inclusion and Equality?

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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.

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INTRODUCTION
LGBT people, today and throughout history, enrich and change the religious communities of which they are a part. From August to November 2020, Fellows of the Global Online Forum on LGBT and Faith published weekly blogs, exploring this rich history and 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. The blogs were shared on social media, most prominently on Salzburg Global’s Facebook page where they generated engagement and conversation.

Through the blog series and subsequent online gatherings, the Global Online Forum on LGBT and Faith strived to showcase and 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.

The public webinar of the Global Online Forum on LGBT and Faith – LGBT* and Faith: How Can We Advance Inclusion and Equality?, held on November 24, 2020 – was thus an opportunity to open that humane conversation to new audiences. The webinar brought together a diverse group of 65 attendees from 23 countries, many of whom had not previously engaged with the Forum.

The webinar consisted of two panels with a series of Fellows who authored blogs for the series as well as commentary and literary reading from two additional Fellows. Klaus Mueller, the Founder and Chair of the Forum, served as moderator for the panel conversations and introduced the two readings. This report presents a summary of the key themes and insights from the public webinar.

**PANEL 1: DIALOGUE AND PERSONAL ACCOUNTABILITY**
SPEAKERS:
Tashi Choedup, Buddhist monastic, human rights and interfaith activist / student of Buddhist philosophy, Root Institute for Wisdom Culture, India

Rev. Ecclesia de Lange, Ordained minister of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa / director of Inclusive and Affirming Ministries, South Africa

Fr. Thomas Ninan, Indian Orthodox priest / general coordinator, ESHA Project of the Christian Service Agency, National Council of Churches in India (NCCI), India

Joy Ladin, poet / David and Ruth Gottesman Chair in English at Stern College for Women, Yeshiva University, New York, USA

In the first panel, four Fellows shared their personal journeys and what they have learned when navigating their religious and LGBT identities. Each was asked to highlight one word to describe that journey.

“CHANGE”
As a practicing Buddhist monastic who uses “they/them” as pronouns to assert their non-binary gender identity, Tashi Choedup’s faith journey through Hinduism, Christianity and now Buddhism is best described by change. According to them, an individual’s spiritual needs are often neglected and do not receive the same amount of care and nourishment as other aspects of our lives. Religion and faith are different entities that can coincide but are not mutually inclusive; religion is dependent on faith, but faith can exist outside of the confines of a religious institution. Choedup’s personal fight for the inclusion of LGBT identities in their faith sphere is their way of moving their religion forward. When faith communities understand that LGBT individuals are not outsiders coming in, but members of their own community seeking love and acceptance, inclusion and understanding can be found: “Making my religious community inclusive and accessible to everyone is my contribution to it, for it to grow and flourish. Consistent dialogue rooted in compassion is important to realize the aspiration of inclusive faith and religious communities, especially with those who are not queer allies yet. The conversations are not between insiders and outsiders, because there are queer people within the fold of faith and religion.”

“INTENTIONAL” AND “COURAGE”
Rev. Ecclesia de Lange was suspended and discontinued as a minister in 2010 after announcing to her congregation that she will marry her same-sex partner. Her difficult faith journey has included years of self-denial and exclusion, but the most difficult part has been finding her own self-acceptance. Today, through her work of organizing inclusive dialogues between faith leaders and LGBT activists, de Lange has learned that dialogue needs to be an intentional, collaborative effort with a willingness to participate in the process toward greater understanding. Participants in this dialogue are asked to enter with an open mind and compassion, creating a safe space for vulnerability, listening, and courage from everyone involved. “When we include diverse voices from LGBT people during a transformative dialogue
process, traditional views of human sexuality, the faith and sacred texts can be challenged.” Many of the participants of de Lange's conversations join feeling as though they already have all of the answers, but leave feeling that their steadfast beliefs have been shaken. “Participants are encouraged not to seek easy and comfortable answers. They grapple with their previous understanding of human sexuality, faith and sacred texts within a dialogue space that includes other diverse stories.” This slow, time-consuming transformation is necessary for sustainable change, but this slowness is often painful as LGBT people remain excluded and ostracized.

“LISTENING”
Bringing together Protestant and Orthodox churches, ecumenical organizations and regional councils, the National Council of Churches in India (NCCI), represents ~14 million people in India. The ESHA Project of the Christian Service Agency, mandated by the NCCI and led by Thomas Ninan, has established the Advanced Institute on Gender, Sexuality, and Religion in Nagpur, India. As a faith leader who has accepted the LGBT community, Ninan believes that learning through listening is the most important action faith leaders can take when interacting with the LGBT community: “Listening results in change of attitude, in healing, in receiving truthful information, and in creating safe spaces for the marginalized in the long run.” The NCCI provides an interfaith, interchurch platform for faith communities to have respectful conversations on gender diversities and sexuality identities, paving the way to deal with many misconceptions and misperceptions. By using training and sensitization programs, the NCCI realized the lived realities of LGBT individuals in their faith communities are often filled with suffering. This reality is why Ninan echoed the importance of the public statements that the NCCI releases: “Public statements are important for an ecumenical body like NCCI. It paves way for further engagement at the grassroots level and as a document of reference for any member church to express solidarity with the marginalized LGBTQI communities.”

“US”
As the first openly transgender professor at an Orthodox Jewish institution, Joy Ladin believes we need to get rid of the “we” versus “them” distinction, and instead accept that LGBT individuals are already part of our faith communities and not a secular incursion or invasion by outsiders. Developing this sense of “us” within religious communities and traditions can be a difficult process but Ladin identified several ways in which activists can strengthen inclusive approaches. These included the storytelling of the experiences of LGBT individuals lived narratives to foster dialogue or engaging religious community leaders in a top-down approach. Creating and sustaining religious communities either specifically for or based on the inclusion of LGBT people and expanding theological and historical understandings of religious traditions, Ladin stated, can highlight ways in which existing traditions already include bases for LGBT inclusion. She finished her discussion of “us” by connecting to Fr. Ninan’s blog post which centered on love. She stated that love is, “the starting point and goal of religious traditions and how communities define ‘us’ is central to the spiritual and religious work of love.”
WHERE ARE WE IN THE PROCESS OF BECOMING MORE INCLUSIVE?
As a group, the panel reflected on how they share a message of hope for the progress that is being made toward inclusion. They highlighted the need for activists to push past the discomfort of uncomfortable conversations and to lean on each other for support, highlighting how conversations such as these are imperative in the transformative process. Love is often referenced as the core of every major religion and the Fellows emphasized that they have hope that together activists can use this root of empathy and understanding to guide religious institutions toward inclusion.

PANEL 2: EMPATHY AND THE LIMITS OF DIALOGUE

SPEAKERS:
Rev. Dr. Scot Sherman, candidate for Episcopal Church priesthood / executive director, Newbigin House of Studies, USA
Ahmed El Hady, political activist / neuroscientist, Princeton University, Egypt/USA
Saskia Wieringa, human rights activist / genocide researcher / professor, University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands

The second panel continued the conversation on personal journeys as three Fellows expanded upon the themes of their blog posts and what they have learned when navigating their religious and LGBT identities. Each was asked to highlight one word to describe that journey.

“EMPATHY”
As a faith leader, Rev. Dr. Scot Sherman’s acceptance of LGBT people was sparked by empathy. “What was transformative for me personally was when I began to know and hear the stories of LGBT Christians: The courage of LGBT siblings to share their stories brought about a new engagement with reality that I could no longer ignore. The demand for inclusion could no
longer be categorized as an outside ‘secular’ intrusion into the faith community; clearly these were credible internal testimonies.’” According to Sherman, contemporary engagement with the LGBT community and re-appropriating tradition are the two movements necessary for LGBT inclusion. As a professor, Sherman expresses the importance of weaving together the divine word spoken in the past with the current reality. Yet, even with empathy for LGBT people, many still face, what Sherman calls, “clobber texts”. These biblical passages have long been used to justify the condemnation and exclusion of LGBT individuals from the church. Queer theologians and biblical scholars are providing a new understanding as, “they are bringing the powerful lens of queer perspective to help the whole church better understand what it means to live faithfully at the crossroads.” These movements of contemporary engagement and re-appropriating tradition are necessary in almost any religious institution to successfully move forward: “The great religions all have the requisite resilience to do this work, else they could not have survived all the changes of the millennia!”

“DANGEROUS”

Working to lobby the Egyptian government to release political prisoners and improve LGBT rights after being forced into exile, Ahmed El Hady provided a skeptical view on the potential of dialogue and empathy in many countries when political systems make it dangerous for LGBT people. A minimum level of civility and freedom is needed to foster empathy. “Growing and living in a military dictatorship like the one we have in Egypt is a substantial barrier to any kind of critical intellectual engagement especially about religion. We have to act fast most of the time and save people when we are in a situation in which people are constantly persecuted and their lives are put in danger.” The danger posed by political and cultural exclusion is not unique and can be found across the globe, particularly in locations where religion plays a key role in politics. What dialogues can take place largely depends on where they are happening in the world. Although liberal Islamic interpretations have emerged in a liberal democratic context, they are out of touch with the harsh political realities in Egypt and many other Muslim-majority countries. Technology has posed the opportunity for queer Muslims to connect under a veil of anonymity in Egypt but currently, El Hady states that activists must focus on the military and religious authorities in these areas to secure LGBT human rights before any change-making conversations can happen.

“TRADITION”

A widely published author on sexual politics in Indonesia, women’s empowerment and heteronormativity in Asia, Saskia Wieringa’s personal faith journey through Protestantism, Hinduism, and Islam is best described by tradition. Homophobic religious authorities, communities, and political leaders often use “tradition” as a basis to an argument that perceives LGBT issues as alien to their religion, culture, and sometimes nation. Regarding LGBT issues as a Western import, religious groups create distance between themselves and their local LGBT communities. “This discourse is pervasive, but not true nor correct: We were there in history. We were there in different forms. We want to express ourselves in our own traditions.” Tradition, in it of itself, is an elusive construct that often tells more about the present political
orientation of those who claim to be keepers of tradition than about the past. Through her anthropological work, Wieringa has been able to uncover many examples of gender diversity and pluralism in religious traditions and arts, healing and spiritual practices and daily life. Her work is a form of archaeology that unearths queerness that has always existed but has long been buried away. Finding examples of these ancient queer practices and religions helps to fight against contemporary heteronormative interpretations and empower LGBT communities to know that they have been present throughout history.

WHAT DID YOU TAKE AWAY FROM THE GLOBAL, VIRTUAL STORYTELLING FOR WHICH THIS BLOG SERIES CREATED THE SPACE?
Throughout the blog series Fellows continued to see courage and the power of storytelling. Recognizing that the changes in danger levels in different areas of the world can limit these conversations and limit many from living their lives freely, storytelling and empathy, however, can come at great risk. It remains the focus of global networks and religious communities to protect these voices wherever they can. Reflecting on the blog series as a whole, one Fellow shared that this is the first conversation on LGBT and faith that they have been a part of that has not broken down into confrontation, affirming that a similar sense of civility and respect can be carried into other conversations regarding faith and LGBT. The sense of comfort that Fellows felt taking part of the Forum has strengthened their conviction in the fight for inclusion and equality for LGBT individuals in faith spheres.

WORD CLOUD PRESENTATION AND SUMMARY ON EMPATHY

PRESENTER:

Gurchaten (Nanoo) Sandhu, United Nations’ Non-Discrimination and Equal Pay Programme Officer / President, UN GLOBE, an advocacy group for the equality and non-discrimination of LGBT staff in the United Nations system
This Word Cloud visual was developed by Fellows in earlier online gatherings, calling out key words relevant to inclusive approaches. Presenting it at the webinar, Nanoo Sandhu noted that our attention is immediately drawn to the word “empathy”. Empathy continues to be identified by the Fellows as a key driving force for change, but Sandhu asked the group to look deeper into the fringes as these words are equally important. “Patience” and “slow process” counter today’s world of immediacy and how activists are anxious to see quick and immediate progress; we often forget the importance of engagement and dialogue even when it is uncomfortable. Additionally, relating to the words “authentic” and “journey”, Sandhu described how dialogue has layers as it needs to exist between the two sides, within groups of activists, and within ourselves as individuals taking care to ask the question: “Are we having the same compassion, love, respect and care for ourselves as individuals to ensure that we can actually engage in those discussions?”

**POEM GUAN YIN BY SASKIA WIERINGA, PRESENTED BY BRENDA ALEGRE**

**PRESENTER:**

*Brenda Rodriguez Alegre*, member of board of directors / lecturer, Society of Transsexual Women Advocates of the Philippines, University of Hong Kong, Philippines

**“INCLUSION” AND “DECOLONIZATION”**

As a Filipino transgender woman raised in the Catholic faith, *Brenda Rodriguez Alegre* identifies with the feeling of longing for inclusion that many LGBT people. Her Catholic upbringing instilled a sense of love and acceptance of God and others and that the church is a protective space open to everyone. This system of beliefs was held very closely by Alegre which deepened the pain she felt when the Catholic Church rejected her LGBT identity. “It’s very painful to experience discrimination, violence, prejudice, and exclusion, not just in greater society, but in your own faith community.” Many LGBT people still hold on to their faith with hope, as, “We were raised with the basic understanding and hope in our system to believe that there is that future where all of us will believe in love, all of the violence we face will be behind us, and that conversations can happen.” Alegre shared how the Philippines’ long and complex history of colonization has also shaped the way she was raised. As part of the trans community, she is familiar with a sense of lacking an identity and connecting to words like “transformations”, “traversals” and “transitions” to describe the long process trans people go through. According to Alegre, a similar sense of transformation must take place in Filipino culture in *decolonizing*. 
their society so that they can find love and acceptance within themselves, removed from the culture that has been imposed upon them.

Alegre offered her voice in reading a poem written by [Saskia Wieringa](#). She wrote her poem [Guan Yin](#) when she discovered a statue of the East Asian transgender deity in one of the session rooms of Salzburg Global. Forum fellows felt that the presence of a transgender deity unexpectedly offered a sense of home and took this rediscovery as a sign and placed their gatherings under Guan Yin’s protection from then on.

**GUAN YIN** by Saskia Wieringa  
*Honorable God/goddess Guan Yin, Venerable Avalokiteshvara*  

*Merciful Kannon  
Bountiful Tara  
*You are many and yet one  
As we are  
*You have travelled all over continents and oceans  
As we have  
*You went through many transformations  
As we did  
*We ask you to protect us in our transformations and journeys, to bless our lives, and to empower us through the bounty of your wisdom  

**CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS**

This public webinar opened up the conversation started by the Fellows’ blog posts to a broader audience. By bridging divides between religious and LGBT communities, the [Salzburg Global LGBT* Forum](#) aims to strengthen inclusive cooperation between these communities and their leaders, and to expand global connections for support and knowledge-sharing within and beyond the program, supporting the next generation of LGBT leaders.

The insights shared in the webinar and the lessons of what is working will now serve as a roadmap for our continuing work on the [Faith Is...? Initiative](#).