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

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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 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 lead 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 SalzburgGlobal.org and generated comments there as well as on other social media platforms where they were shared. 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. The Global Online Forum on LGBT* and Faith strives 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. 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 for support and
knowledge-sharing within and beyond the program, supporting the next generation of LGBT leaders. The lessons of what is working will also serve as a roadmap for our continuing work on the *Faith Is...?* Initiative.

By using a social media blog series, we are developing a space for reflection and give visibility to guiding voices. Our first online meeting allowed Forum Fellows to connect from around the world. Our panel consisted of our five blog authors who discussed some of the motivating themes of their articles and prompting questions for our breakout discussions.

**FELLOWS’ PERSPECTIVES**

Five personal journeys and experiences framed our conversation on the challenges that are faced when bridging faith groups with LGBT communities:

The blog post by Joy Ladin, the first openly-transgender professor at an Orthodox Jewish institution, USA, entitled, “*Religious Communities and Leaders Need to Stop Seeing LGBT* People as Other, as Them, and Start Seeing Them as Us*”, centers on how recognition and appreciation of our differences can make our communities stronger and more diverse. Joy emphasized the importance of delighting in our differences instead of ignoring their existence and stated that in the process, we add value to our communities. Inclusion means in her words that “our communities feel incomplete when those we see as different in certain ways aren’t there.” Regardless of background, we can all identify an experience where we felt as an outsider, as a stranger, as a *them* and through these experiences we can build empathy in religious communities for LGBT individuals. During our discussion, Joy added that, “*the work for inclusion is challenging religious communities to distinguish between the social aspect of community and the theological imperatives of religion.*”

In Joy’s vision, the hard work of inclusion doesn’t require a theological revolution, but a new mindset within the community itself that decouples social community from these theological imperatives. The social constraints that are placed on LGBT persons need to be released so that community members open their minds and start seeing their identities as assets of diversity.

The blog post entitled, “*A Global Conversation on Faith and LGBT* Needs to Begin Opening Up to Complex Questions*” by Giti Thadani, a founding member of the first Indian lesbian archive Sakbi, India, focuses on cultural heritage and the long history of nonbinary traditions in Hinduism. During our discussion, she highlighted how her personal journey has led to reflections on the concept of ‘religion’. She stated:

“For me, these memories bring up the question about how the concept of ‘religion’ is defined? How does it play out in different temporal and geopolitical cultural, spiritual and intellectual contexts? The main foundation of certain kinds of monotheism is institutional belief. It is not the private search of the divine in its plural modalities (be it private faith, secret knowledge, or artistic transcendence). It is not relegated to an exterior savior or fixed eternally onto a human middleman (such as a prophet). This inherently sets up binary oppositions at multiple levels including that of gender, eros and sexuality.”
While institutionalized belief often dominates the definition of faith, it can also limit our pursuit of spiritual understanding. In the ancient canonical texts of Hinduism, the contrasting binary modality of male and female, heaven and earth, do not exist. Instead, the cosmogony leads to multiple non-competing, dynamic representations. By removing the constraints of the binary roles, a complex cosmological philosophy is built. This dynamic continuum was shattered with the widespread spread of monotheistic ideologies that often follow this binary thought process. Instead, Giti shares, "religion became an ideology based on a system of absolute belief and adherence instead of a fluid humane value system to navigate, communicate, and re-explore different levels of life." This shift in belief system echoes today’s refusal to work out complex familial, social, and professional relationships. The monopolization of religion by a singular institution gives this institution over-arching power to influence politics and decisions that affect everyday people, even those who do not subscribe to that religion. Giti expanded on the importance of understanding the unique cultural heritage behind each religion so that we can address points of pain such as colonial histories or their involvement in violence and even genocide. The diverse histories of religions offer additional unique challenges during the fight for inclusion around the world. Moving forward, Giti stated, in order for LGBT people to reach inclusion, we must have genuine global communication and conversation that address complex, and sometimes uncomfortable questions.

The blog post by Lebohang Matela, the regional coordinator of FOCCISA Health and Gender Justice Network, Lesotho, entitled, “If Religious Leaders Can Speak with One Voice Together with the LGBT* Community, then the Battle is Won” centers on the impact religion has on everyday community life. Her organization FOCCISA (Fellowship of Christian Councils in Southern Africa) focuses on creating safe spaces for conversation between LGBT and religious leaders in 11 Southern African nations to help bring social inclusion of LGBT people into local and regional communities. These dialogues provide a pragmatic approach where religious leaders can connect with LGBT activists. Support from faith organizations and governments can strengthen the message of inclusion. Lebohang shares in her blog post that the result of these personal dialogues between selected religious and LGBT leaders has been encouraging and has had a profound immediate impact as, “the skepticsisms from both sides give way to compassion and sometimes even love for one another.” During our discussion, Lebohang expanded on the importance of shifting the attitudes of religious leaders as they have considerable impact on the attitudes of government officials. She stated that government officials, “learn these attitudes from their church leaders because they are also part of the church community.” Lebohang’s vision is that if we engage religious groups and change the attitudes of religious leaders, they can shift the mindset of their congregations and transform communities.

Sukhdeep Singh, the founder and editor-in-chief of Gaylaxy Magazine, India, wrote the blog post, “I Want To Assure Other Young Queer Sikhs That One Could Be Gay and Sikh.” This piece connects his personal journey of being a gay Sikh man to the challenges that many LGBT people face. Many LGBT individuals face dual ostracization as their religion rejects them for their LGBT identity and the LGBT community rejects them for their religious identity. Sukhdeep shared his personal experiences in which he
increasingly used social media to bring out new voices. As founder and editor-in-chief of the *Gaylaxy* magazine, he used both his own platform and other social media venues to create a visible space for LGBT Sikhs. Unifying his religious and LGBT identity, Sukhdeep was the first to wear a rainbow Turban at the Bengaluru Pride in 2014, and many times since then. His new documentary entitled, *Sab Rab de Bande (We Are All God’s Children, 2020)*, depicts the experiences of queer Sikhs who recount the challenges of their dual identities. He affirms that, “it is very important as queer people we ensure that we do not let this narrative go the wrong way because right now the discussion within Sikh faith is just starting to emerge on these topics.” By taking an active part in the dialogues that are taking place through conversation, in social media, and film, queer individuals can assert their role in religious groups and advocate for their inclusion. According to Sukhdeep, the courage to live openly to one’s true identity can be transformative.

**Ahmed El Hady**, a research scientist at Princeton University, Egypt / USA, writes in his blog post entitled, *“I Would Love To See Many Members of the LGBT Community Revolting Against the Predominant Religious Discourse but Who Will Defend Them?”* about the complexity geopolitical positions can add to already challenging conversations. Even if individuals share a common religion or LGBT status, different challenges and experiences persist when geographic location changes. He describes the situation in Egypt where an authoritarian government, and a society ruled by religious authority, often put the LGBT community in direct danger. Derived from basic human rights, LGBT people find their daily life in jeopardy and they are forced to hide their identities or face castigation. The wounds of rejection from their country, society, and family run deep and cause emotional trauma. During our discussion Ahmed highlighted that, “this is why my activism doesn’t take into account only LGBTQ issues because it’s very coupled to how the state is attacking almost everyone... we want to ease the pressure to be able to have this conversation.” Any conversation, so Ahmed states, that connects faith and sexuality needs to consider the specific geopolitical context and the related changes in danger levels. During our dialogues we must conceptualize how our conversations will materialize on the ground. How do we protect individuals in vulnerable areas so that discourse can continue without putting them in danger? For Ahmed, the secularization of politics is imperative so that LGBT people can exist without fear.

**Sudeshan Reddy**, the communication specialist at United Nations Childrens Fund, South Africa, served as commentator, pointing out that with any religion there can be many interpretations. Some of these interpretations are more liberal and others more conservative. The responsibility falls on individuals and religious leaders on how religious texts are interpreted. As queer people, Sudeshan stated, we must be a part of the dialogue. By playing an active role in these conversations, that have just started to emerge on these topics, queer rights can come to the forefront. Bringing forward our stories, we can counteract the ignorance that many people hold of the LGBT community, using a diverse array of media to bring people together and tell the stories of queer people to religious leaders who might not know a queer person.

**Jayne Ozanne**, director and founder of the Ozanne Foundation, United Kingdom, added, supported by others, that for many religions, remaining orthodox on the issues of sexuality has become a touchstone to show how devout they are. It’s therefore become a defining point as to whether religions leaders are
respected amongst their peers. That is one of the main barriers that stop many from speaking out, even if they are supportive. One of the important steps is to bring people who are privately affirming together so that they know they are not alone.
REFLECTIONS FROM OUR BREAKOUT GROUPS:
THE NEED FOR A DIVIDE BETWEEN GOVERNMENT AND RELIGION;
A TRUE DE-COLONIZATION, AND A PRAGMATIC APPROACH TOWARDS INCLUSION

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

Secularization: The importance of the secularization of government was highlighted as a necessary step to foster dialogue. When governments are aligned with religious institutions and ideologies, there is a notion of “purity” which seems to cut across faith traditions and regions. This translates notably to very patriarchal and heteronormative gender norms. Reddy noted on the importance of distinguishing between anti-clerical and anti-religious mobilizations and concurred that “one should not assume that secularization necessarily means more progressiveness, or more openness, or more tolerance.”

Sharing our stories: Whether a society has complete secularization or a theocracy, LGBT communities still face challenges. While our societies navigate this strong intersectionality between politics and religion, Brenda Alegre, a lecturer at the University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong/Philippines, highlighted the importance of empowering LGBT communities to be a part of a dialogue by “building their skills and being involved in conversations with the government, and discussing issues that affect them on a regular basis.” Sharing our lived narratives and stories with faith leaders in safe spaces has proven an effective technique in fostering dialogue and progress to inclusion.

De-colonialization: Several Fellows stated that colonization often had the effect of destroying gender diverse practices, and, as emphasized by Saskia Wieringa, a professor at the University of Amsterdam, Netherlands, that post-colonial leaders may continue that process, in the name of restoring tradition. She called that post-colonial amnesia. Ahmed El Hady agreed stating that many postcolonial thinkers basically continue this destruction by reinforcing oppressive practices as an act of anti–colonialism, using, in the words of Simon Petitjean, the program manager of GIN-SSOGIE, France, an enhanced and institutionalized patriarchy.

Is the glass half empty or half full?

Finally, as a collective we reflected on one lingering question as to where we are right now: Is the glass half empty or half full? Are we optimistic or despairing?

Some Fellows shared a feeling of optimism, others a sense of despair. The challenges that we face when dealing with faith communities are large and they strongly depend on geopolitical developments. In some regions of the world there has been rapid progress towards LGBT inclusion in faith communities, whereas in others we see severe backlash.
Worldwide, however, LGBT people are increasingly insisting on their inclusion in religious and cultural traditions; and religious leaders and their congregations across all denominations have begun to interpret their own beliefs in ways that are more inclusive. In a 2018 Declaration of the National Consultation on Interfaith Engagement with Human Sexuality and Gender Diversity, the National Council of Churches in India (NCCI) emphasized “the innate ability of each faith community to understand, accept and celebrate gender, sexual and sexuality identities.”

Gurchaten Sandu, the programme support officer of United Nation’s International Labour Organization (ILO), United Kingdom, concluded how the progress being made happens all too slowly: our glasses are being filled by a slow drip, but a drip none the less. He left us with the metaphor of, “having a half empty glass but standing at the bar at happy hour and we’re waiting for a refill.” We must continue to refill our glasses’ by conversing with others, fostering dialogues between groups who are working on similar issues, and keeping up the fight so that everyone can live truly to who they are.

As voiced by Tashi Choedup, a Buddhist monastic and resident Sangha member of Root Institute for Wisdom Culture, India: “Sense of community- Separated geographically, but connected in the aspiration of making the world inclusive! 🌍”, many Fellows welcomed the first meeting and a sense of global connection.

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 second online convening of our LGBT* Forum: “Faith Is...?” will take place on October 20, 2020 at 2pm CEST. The theme of this meeting will be Personal Journeys. Klaus Mueller ended our conversation with a quote, and perspective on change, from anthropologist Margaret Mead who attended the very first Salzburg Seminar in 1947: “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”