

Islam and Moral Status of Homosexuality¹

Abstract: Can one believe in Islam and the validity of Quran as God's word, and at the same time believe that homosexual conducts are morally permissible? From pure rational/secular grounds, one might be convinced of the fact (assuming it is a fact) that homosexuality is morally permissible. But on the other hand, this person, as a Muslim, encounters with many Quranic verses that explicitly condemn homosexuality as an abomination (*al-faheshah*). Therefore, this seems to be a dilemma. This dilemma has two dimensions: a rational dimension that has to do with arguments for or against homosexuality, and a textual dimension that has to do with different understandings of Quran. This dilemma arises when one is rationally convinced that there is no reason to condemn homosexual conducts on one hand, and her commitment to God's words as revealed in Quran on the other hand. More generally, it is just another case of the old conflict between reason and revelation.

In this article, I would discuss each horn of this dilemma separately, and suggest some resolutions for the dilemma. More precisely, my main goal is to show that it is possible for a person to be a devoted Muslim, and at the same time consistently believes that homosexuality is morally permissible.

Rational dimension of immorality of homosexuality

(1)

Muslim scholars have not bothered to argue against homosexuality in depth and details. They assumed the wrongness of homosexuality as obvious. But there are at least two places in the Islamic texts you may find some critical remarks that can be formulated as a rational argument against homosexuality: The first place is in *Fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) in the context of verdicts about *lawat* (sodomy), and the second place is in *Tafsir* (commentary on Quran) in the context of *lut's* story. By far, the most common argument against homosexuality among Muslim scholars is a "naturalist argument" which is under influence of Aristotle's ethics and metaphysics. We may formulate their comments as the following argument:

- (1) All homosexual conducts are unnatural conducts.
- (2) All unnatural conducts are morally wrong.

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Therefore,

(3) All homosexual conducts are morally wrong.

And according to the dominant meta-ethical theory in Islamic tradition:

(4) All morally wrong conducts are conducts that are condemned by God.

Therefore, one may say;

(5) All homosexual conducts are condemned by God.

In this argument, premise (1) and (2) provide the rational foundation for moral condemnation of homosexual behaviors. Premise (2) is a general account for morally right and wrong actions, and it is a version of Aristotelian naturalistic account of morality. This theory was well known among Muslim philosophers (especially Peripatetic philosophers) and theologians. Premise (2) has nothing specific for or against homosexuality. It functions against homosexuality only if we combine it with (1). Therefore, as far as the issue of homosexuality is concerned, it is premise (1) that plays the central role for condemning homosexual conducts.

The role of premise (4) is to transfer a moral condemnation into a divine condemnation. In other words, according to this premise, homosexual conduct is not only a *moral* wrongdoing but also a *sin*.

Here I will mainly focus on premises (1), and (4).

(2)

Many contend that same gender sex is "unnatural". But what does it mean? Several possible meanings for "unnatural" in this context are actually suggested by Muslim thinkers:

1. What is unusual or abnormal is unnatural.

In other words, what deviates from the norm, that is, from what most people do is considered as unnatural. However, the statistical frequency of an act does not determine its moral status. For example, left hand writing is not a norm. Does it mean writing by left hand is morally wrong?

2. What is not practiced by other animals is unnatural.

This definition goes back to Plato. According to him, homosexuality is wrong because even animals do not exhibit such behavior. However, this claim is not plausible, because:

First, it rests on a false premise. Numerous studies have shown that some animals do form homosexual pair-bond.

Second, Even if animals did not behave homosexually, that fact would not prove that homosexuality is immoral. After all, animals do not cook their food, brush their teeth, participate in religious worship, or attend college. Indeed, the idea that animals could provide us with our *moral* standards is simply wrong.

3. What does not proceed from innate desire is unnatural.

However, some scientists propose that homosexual people are born that way, and that it is therefore natural (and thus morally good and right) for them to form homosexual relationships. Some other scientists maintain that homosexuality is a lifestyle choice, which is therefore unnatural (and thus morally bad and wrong).

But both sides assume a connection between the origin of homosexual orientation, on the one hand, and the moral status of homosexual activity, on the other. Insofar as they share that assumption, both sides are wrong. The first pro-homosexual side claims: "They are born that way; therefore it is natural and good." This inference assumes that all innate desires are good ones (i.e., that they should be acted upon.) But this assumption is clearly false. Research suggests that some people are born with a predisposition toward violence, but such people have no more right to strangle their neighbors than anyone else. On the other hand, from the fact that a kind of desire is not innate, it does not follow that we ought not to act on it. I probably do not have any innate tendency to write with my left hand, but it does not follow that it would be immoral for me to do so.

4. What violates an organ's principal purpose is unnatural.

Perhaps when people claim that homosexual conduct is unnatural they mean that it cannot result in procreation. The idea behind the argument is that each of human organs has a principal purpose: eyes are for seeing, ear for hearing, and genitals are for procreating. According to this argument, it is immoral to use an organ in a way that violates its principal purpose. This is the most common suggestion among Muslim scholars concerning the meaning of "natural" in this context.

However, there are some problems here:

First, many of our organs have multiple purposes. You can use your mouth for talking, eating, breathing, licking stamps, chewing gum, etc. Which one is the principal purpose? Just because people can and do use their sexual organs to procreate, it does not follow that they should not use them for other purposes. Sexual organs seem very well suited for expressing love, for giving and receiving pleasure,

and for celebrating, replenishing, and enhancing a relationship- even when procreation is not a factor.

Second, are opponents of homosexuality prepared to condemn heterosexual couples who use contraception? If the main purpose of the sexual organs is nothing but procreation, then it seems that all heterosexual conducts that are not aimed at, or do not lead to, procreation must be condemned. Does it mean sterile couples should not have sex? How about sex during pregnancy? None of these sexual conducts can lead to procreation. It seems that intimacy and pleasure are morally legitimate purposes for sex, even in cases where procreation is impossible. But since homosexual sex *can* achieve these purposes as well, it cannot be condemned on the grounds that it is not procreative.

5. What is disgusting or offensive is unnatural.

It often seems that when people call homosexuality "unnatural" they really just mean that it is disgusting.

But plenty of morally neutral activities disgust *some* people, activities such as handling snakes, eating snail, performing autopsies, cleaning toilets, and so on. Indeed, for centuries, most people found interracial relationships disgusting, yet that feeling hardly proves that such relationships are wrong.

(3)

How about the premise (4)?

First, we need to understand this premise. This premise expresses a certain connection between morality and religion. How should we interpret it? In fact, the relation between morality and religion has been a matter of great controversy in the history of Islamic thought. In general, there are two major theological schools in the history of Islamic thought: *Mu'tazila*, and *Ash'aryya*. These two schools vastly disagreed on many issues including the relation between goodness/badness of actions on one hand, and God' will or commands on the other hand.

Mu'tazilites held that good and evil are objective and that the moral values of actions are intrinsic to them and can be discerned by human reason. Hence, God's justice obliged Him to act in accordance with the moral law. For instance, he is thus bound to stand by his promise to reward the righteous with paradise, and his threat to punish the wicked with hellfire. Many of *Mu'tazilites* held that the principle of justice made it always requisite for God to do for people what was to their greatest

advantage. (Of course, some others believe that this is not a requirement of justice but "the principle of grace" (*Qaede Lotf*.)

But for *Ash'ari*, divine justice is a matter of faith. We know the difference between good and evil solely because of God's revelation, and not by the exercise of our own reason. God makes the rules, and whatever he decrees is just, yet God himself is under no obligation; if He wished, he could punish the righteous and admit the wicked to paradise.

The disagreement between *Mu'tazila* and *Ash'aryya* can be summarized in the following statement:

According to *Mu'tazila*, God commands/prohibits X *because* X is right/wrong; and according to *Ash'aryya* X is right/wrong *because* X is commanded/prohibited by God.

Now suppose one is convinced that the rational/secular arguments fail to prove that homosexuality is wrong, and also she is committed to *Ash'aryya's* view on the relation between morality and God's will. In such a case, this person can simply claim that this fact (assuming it is a fact) shows nothing but the defect of secular ethics. This failure, from her perspective, only proves that we need God for morality. As soon as one adopts *Ash'aryya's* view, reason loses its normative authority to a large extent. In other words, the believers who adopt such position will not consider the results of rational inquiries seriously.

To my knowledge, *Ash'aryya*, by far has been the dominant view among Muslims, whether scholars or laymen.

However, *Ash'aryya's* view leads to trouble, for it presents God's commands as *arbitrary*. It means God could have given different commands just as easily. He could have commanded us to be liars, and then lying, and not truthfulness, would become right. According to this view, honesty, for example, was not right *before* God commanded it. Therefore, he could have had no more reason to command it than its opposite; and so, from the rational point of view, his command is perfectly arbitrary. Moreover, on this view, the doctrine of the goodness of God and his justice are reduced to nonsense. If we accept the idea that good and bad or justice and injustice are defined by reference to God's will, then these notions are deprived of any meaning. If "X is good" *means* "X is commanded by God", then "God's commands are good" would mean only "God's commands are commanded by God," an empty truism.

In this discussion, I will adopt a rationalism of the *Mut'zilia's* kind, according to which God's commands are limited to the limitations of logic and ethics, and moral rightness and wrongness, in principle, are discernable by human reason. In other words, if we are convinced of the fact that there is no good reason to condemn certain conduct, then we must be prepared to understand God's words in accordance with that moral fact (assuming it is a fact.)

So far as the "naturalistic argument" is concerned, Muslim can condemn homosexual conducts as morally wrong if they provide a rationally satisfactory account for the claim that homosexual conducts are unnatural (in a morally relevant sense).

However, if one is convinced that this requirement is not (and probably cannot be) satisfied, then she is justified to claim that there is no adequate moral ground to condemn homosexuality. Moreover, if she believes that *Mota'zilia's* view is rationally preferable to *Ash'aryya's*, then she has a reason to take the results of the rational inquiries into account when she attempts to understand the holy text.

Textual dimension of immorality of homosexuality

(4)

Now suppose someone is convinced that there is no moral reason to condemn homosexuality. Could this person remain a Muslim? There are verses in Quran that seem to be explicitly against homosexual conducts. Almost all the Quranic verses against homosexuality were revealed in the context of the story of *Lut*. Here are some examples:

The story begins when some angels visited Abraham. Abraham, for some reason, felt fear.

"They said: fear not: we have been sent against the people of Lut." (*Hud*,70)

This news worried Abraham, so he decided to argue with God, and try to convince Him to forgive the people of *Lut*. According to Quran:

"He began to plead with us for *Lut's* people." (*Hud*, 74)

Quran does not mention the details of this conversation (the Old Testament has more details on this matter). Finally, God could not convince Abraham, and declared:

“O Abraham! Seek not this. The decree of your Lord has gone forth; for them there comes a penalty that cannot be turned back” (*Hud*, 76)

And gently mentioned:

“For Abraham was, without doubt, forbearing (of faults), compassionate, and given to look to Allah” (*Hud*, 75).

The angels came to *Lut*. But something horrible happened:

“Lut's people came rushing towards him, and they had been long in the habit of practicing abominations. He said: "O my people! Here are my daughters: they are purer for you! Now fear Allah, and cover me not with shame about my guests! Is there not among you a single right-minded man?"

They said: "well you know we have no need of your daughters: indeed you know quite well what we want."

He said: "would that I had power to suppress you or that I could betake myself to some powerful support"" (*Hud*, 78-80)

In these verses, there is no explicit mention to homosexual behavior, but in some other verses, there are some explicit hints:

“(We also sent) Lut (as an apostle): behold, he said to his people, "Do you do what is shameful though you see (its iniquity)? Would you really approach men in your lust rather than women? Nay, you are a people (grossly) ignorant!” (*Naml*, 54,55)

And similar to the above verses:

“We also (sent) Lut: he said to his people: "Do you commit lewdness such as no people in creation (ever) committed before you? For you practice your lusts on men in preference to women: you are indeed a people transgressing beyond bounds” (*A'raf*, 80, 81).

These verses almost all we have in Quran against homosexual conducts. Now the dilemma is clear: For a rational believer, the following two claims do not seem to be compatible: (a) It seems that the revelation (Quran) claims that homosexual conducts are condemned by God, and to commit homosexuality is a capital crime, it is an abomination. Moreover, (b) it seems that reason claims that homosexuality is morally permissible.

As I said before, for the person who adopts *Ash'aryya's* view, the answer to this dilemma is clear and easy: accept (a) and reject (b). But a Muslim rationalist

(i.e., the one who adopts *Motazila's* view) cannot take such an easy road. What can she do?

(5)

So far as I can see, a Muslim rationalist has at least three options available:

(1) *Internal reinterpretation*, i.e., try to provide an understanding of the text which is compatible with the requirements of independent reason based on linguistic considerations inside the text.

(2) *External reinterpretation*, i.e., try to understand the text in the light of the historical context.

(3) *Radical reinterpretation*, i.e., try to understand the text in the light of historicity of the text itself. In other words, accepting the literal meaning of the verses, but denying their essentiality to the heart of the Quranic message.

I will explain each strategy briefly.

Internal reinterpretation: In many cases, "words" or "phrases" have more than one legitimate meaning. However, for one or other reason, some of those meanings become dominant. But sometimes when the commentator is convinced of some religiously external facts that do not seem to be compatible with the apparent meaning of the verses, she might reconsider the domain of the legitimate meanings of the words or phrases, and try to suggest a new meaning for the "problematic" verses.

Here I am not to suggest any new linguistic interpretation of the above-mentioned verses of Quran. However, I like to highlight some clues, if taken seriously, might lead to a new understanding of those verses:

(a) The so-called homosexuality of Lut's people, according to Quran, was not the only reason they got punished by God. Quran is explicit about this: "Do you [i.e., the people of Lut] indeed approach men, and cut off the highway? - and practice wickedness in your councils?" (*Ankabut*, 29). As you can see, according to Quran, Lut's people were highway robbers, and they were committed some other public crimes as well.

(b) There is nothing whatsoever about homosexual relationship among women in Quran. (There is only one vague hint about Lut's wife who got punished along with other people of Lut, but it is not clear at all that her punishment had anything to do with her being a lesbian). If sexual contact between two persons of the same sex is impermissible *only because* it is a sex between two people of the same sex, then sexual contact between two women must be as bad as sexual contact

between two men. Nevertheless, in Quran there is an explicit asymmetry here. What does it mean? One might suggest that homosexuality among men is condemned not because it is a sexual contact between two people of the same sex, but because there is something special about male homosexuality that makes it condemnable. But what is that "thing" that makes male homosexuality wrong, but female homosexuality, at least ignorable? I believe whatever it is, it has something to do with the inferior status of women in the ancient time.

(c) Lut and Abraham were relatives, and Abraham knew all about the people of Lut. But when Abraham was informed of God's decision to punish them, he stood up for those people, and argued with God to save them from the punishment. It is important to notice that God could not convince Abraham of His decision, but He treated Abraham very gently and kindly. God admired Abraham for his good heart, and never took his defense of those people as something shameful or stigmatic.

External reinterpretation: We must never forget that "meaning" is "context-sensitive". In other words, the same word might have different meanings in different historical contexts. One important way for believers to maintain the inerrancy of Quran is that they learn to interpret Quranic verses in their historical context. Commentators always have been cautious about what they've called *Shaan nozol al-ayat* (i.e., the historical conditions under which Quranic verses were revealed). If one takes the historical context of Quranic verses seriously, then she might conclude that the sense of "homosexuality" which is condemned in Quran might not be the same as what we are talking about nowadays, and is sometimes assumed to be morally permissible. There are some hints that suggest this possibility:

(1) According to Quran, Lut seemed to believe his people's homosexuality was a matter of choice. When he offered his own daughters to the people, he must have assumed that if they wanted, they could prefer women to men. In other words, he was condemning a behavior that, in his view, was freely chosen. But do people really "choose" to be homosexual? "Homosexuality", as understood today, is not the matter of choice. People are born that way. If so, then can one claim that the kind of behavior Lut was condemning was different from the kind of homosexual conduct has been morally defended in our time?

(2) In fact, Quran does not specify precisely what kind of homosexual conduct was condemned. As far as I know, no moralist today claims that all kinds of sexual conduct that involve homosexual behaviors are morally permissible. On the

contrary, there is a consensus among moralists today that some cases of sexual conducts that involve homosexual behaviors are morally wrong. By far, the most common instance of homosexual conduct in eastern culture was sexual contact between an older man and a younger boy (the same is true of ancient Greek culture as well). In Sufism what was called *Sohbat al-ahdath* , in most cases, was nothing but making love with little boys. Sexual contact with minors is morally condemnable by any moral standards. As I said, all Quranic verses against homosexuality were revealed in the context of Lut's story, and virtually all scholars of Old Testament agree that homosexual relations during the Biblical time were vastly different from homosexual relationships in our time. Often such relationships were integral to pagan practices. Therefore, it is possible to think that the kind of homosexual conduct that is condemned by Quran and Bible are different from the notion of homosexuality we have in mind today. As I mentioned, Quran is not explicit about the kind of homosexual behavior it condemns. Presumably, it was assumed that people at the time had clear notion of it. There is only one place that we have more details about the kind of homosexual behavior was condemned by Quran: It is when the people of Lut came rushing towards him to force his young good looking guests to have sex with them. This aggressive violent behavior more than anything else is the clear case of attempt to rape! And it is condemnable by any moral standards.

(c) The rationale behind historical investigation is the following moral principle:

"What was true of one time is not necessarily true of some other time."

Muslim scholars very well know this principle. Consider the case of usury, the lending of money for interest. The Quran condemns this practice in no uncertain terms. Should believers therefore close their saving accounts? Not necessarily. According to some interpretations, the Quranic prohibition against usury no longer applies. The reason is that economic conditions have changed substantially since the Prophet time, such that usury no longer has the same negative consequences it had when the prohibitions were issued.

Consider another example. In Quran there are verses that allow Muslim to have slaves, and there are many rules how to treat them (*Muhammad*, 4; *Ahzab*, 52; *Nisa*, 25, etc). To my knowledge, there are very few Muslim scholars, if any, who still believe that the institution of slavery is legitimate, and some people should be slaved, or we are allowed to have slave. Some Muslim scholars claim that slavery

was imposed upon Islam. In other words, it was a part of people's form of life at the time, and it was not possible to overturn it immediately. Therefore, Islam had to accept it as a fact, and try to modify it in favor of the slaves. As with usury, slavery, and the like, substantial changes in cultural context have altered the meaning and consequences- and thus the moral status of the practices in question. Therefore, using Quranic condemnations of homosexuality against contemporary homosexuality might be like using its condemnations of usury against contemporary banking.

Of course, proponents of external reinterpretation are not claiming that Quran has been wrong before and therefore may be wrong this time. They all assume the infallibility of Quran. Rather, they claim that when we do apply Quran, we must pay attention to morally relevant cultural differences between the time of the Prophet and today. Such attention will help us distinguishing between specific time bound prohibitions (for example, laws against usury or homosexual relations), and the enduring moral values they represent (for example, generosity or respect for persons). If we deny this crucial point, then we are committed ourselves to some rather strange views on slavery, usury, women's roles, astronomy, evolution, and the like.

Radical reinterpretation: According to this approach, homosexuality is indeed condemned in Quran, but this condemnation is not essential to the heart of the Quranic message. This condemnation reflects the culture and common belief of the people at the time of revelation. Quran consists of two layers: one is *shell*, and the other is the *heart* or the core of the message. The shell reflects the socio-historical aspects of the revelation, and the core is what God essentially intended to convey to human beings. Then what is the function of the shell if it is not essential to the heart of the message?

To answer this question, we should keep in mind that *wahy* (the Arabic term for revelation of Quran to the Prophet) literally means conveying a message in a hidden way, like whispering. So Quran is considered as a message from God to human beings. But in order to communicate a message at least two conditions must be satisfied:

First, the sender must employ a system of symbols, which is common between him and the receiver. For example, if I expect you to understand me, I have to speak in English. In other words, I have to employ English language as the media to convey my thoughts to you.

Second, sharing the same language is not sufficient to communicate with others. In addition to that, we must share the same background knowledge, same cultural context, or as some philosophers say "same horizon of meaning".

To explain this point, suppose I tell you the following statement:

(1) "To carry caraway to Kerman."

What does it mean? You might not know the meaning of the word "Kerman". "Kerman" is the name of a city in south of Iran. Now you know the meaning of every single word in that sentence. Nevertheless, most likely you still do not know what it means. In order to understand the meaning of this sentence, we need to know more than English. Now I may culturally translate that sentence into American English as follows:

(2) "To sell refrigerators to Eskimos."

Sentence (1) and (2) mean the same: "to supply something which is unnecessary." Both sentences are in English, but the reason you understood the second sentence but not the first one, is simple: You and sentence (2) share the same horizon of meaning. In other words, you know the cultural background behind (2) but not (1).

I think this simple example can illustrate two important rules of hermeneutics.

First rule: As I said before, communication is not possible unless the speaker employs a horizon of meaning which the other side of the communication knows as well.

Second rule: There is a meaningful distinction between the shell and the heart of a message. Sentences (1) and (2) convey the same thought, but in two different forms; same soul, but different bodies. The forms are accidental to the message, but the thought is essential.

The same is true of Quran as well. Quran explicitly says: "We sent not an apostle except (to teach) in the language of his (own) people, in order to make (things) clear to them" (*Ibrahim*, 4), and: "We have made it a Quran in Arabic, that you may be able to understand (and learn wisdom)" (*Zukhruf*, 3). However, as I said, here language means more than a certain system of codes and symbols; it also includes the culture and the background knowledge of the people at the time, otherwise those people could not have understood the message at all. Prophet Muhammad said, "Talk to people in proportion to their reasons." It means if you want to communicate with a

group of people you have to respect their intellectual ability, their background knowledge, cultural capacities and the like.

Therefore, it is safe to say that to convey His message to the people, God employed Arabic language, and in addition to that, the culture of the people at the time. From the perspective of a believer, the *heart* of the Quranic message is timeless, it is for all people, and all times; but the *shell* of the message, i.e., the reflection of Arab's culture at the time of revelation is accidental, and limited to that time. The shell was a necessary condition to communicate to the people at that time, but it was not essential to the heart of the message. It means Quran consists of two worlds: first world is the holy world of the timeless truths, and second world is the historical world of the people at the time of revelation. Being Muslim requires submission to the first world, but not the second world.

Now one might claim that many controversial passages in the Quran belong to the second world of the text, for example, controversial verses about women's status, slavery, Ptolemaic cosmology, and the like. If reason can establish the permissibility of homosexual conducts, then one can claim that the relevant verses of Quran are parts of the second world, i.e., they represent the common opinion of the people at the time, and so they are not essential to the heart of the message. Moreover, since being Muslim, according to this view, is nothing but submitting to the heart of the message, one can consistently believe in God's words and the permissibility of homosexuality at the same time.

(6)

Finally, "Is it possible to be a Muslim and at the same time consistently believe that homosexuality is morally permissible?" I believe the answer is yes. To my understanding, the Quranic verses concerning homosexuality are open to new interpretations. Even if for any reason, one does not find the new upcoming interpretations convincing, another option is still available: she might claim that those verses belong to the shell of the text, i.e., they are not essential to the heart of the Quranic message, and being Muslim requires one's commitment only to the heart of the message, and not to the accidental elements of the holy text.

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