

## Diversity in religion: Islam



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# Contents

Introduction	4
Learning Outcomes	5
1 Attitudes to male same-sex relationships in Islam tradition	6
2 Internal diversity in contemporary Islam	8
Conclusion	10
What next?	12
References	12
Further reading	12
Acknowledgements	13

## Introduction

Religions are internally diverse; they encompass all aspects of human culture and behaviour; they are dynamic and changing. Harvard University professor, Diane Moore, has emphasised that we need to be aware of these three qualities in order to help us to understand religion (Religion and Public Life, 2022).

In order to consider the diversity of Muslim attitudes to same-sex relationships, you will watch a two-part interview with Dr Shanon Shah, author of *The Making of a Gay Muslim: Religion, Sexuality and Identity in Malaysia and Britain*.

Interested in taking your learning further? You might find it helpful to explore the Open University's [Religious Studies courses and qualifications](#).

### Resources for teachers

There are discussion questions, a classroom activity and mini research project suggested at the end of this course.

# Learning Outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- understand the range of attitudes towards same-sex relationships among Muslims
- recognise change and diversity in Islam and in religion in general.

# 1 Attitudes to male same-sex relationships in Islam tradition

What do you think is the Islamic teaching regarding sexual preference?

As you think about this question, ask yourself where your ideas about this topic might have come from – from a newspaper or magazine article, a book, your social media feeds, or somewhere else?

## Activity 1

Watch this interview with Dr Shanon Shah and make a few notes about the main points.

Video content is not available in this format.



*Provide your answer...*

## Discussion

As regards-same sex relationships, Dr Shah explains that there was no reference in the traditional Muslim sources of authority to homosexuality as such, and no word in the Qur'an (nor incidentally in the Hebrew religious texts or the Christian Gospels) that can be translated as homosexuality. The word itself is a modern one.

It's worth pointing out here that although Dr Shah doesn't say so in the video, in his book he explains that drawing on the stories in the Bible, the Qur'an itself refers at a number of points to the story of Lot and God's destruction of his people by hurling 'stones of baked clay ... layer upon layer' (Q. 11:82) on their town (Shah, 2018). It's

usually argued that this was a punishment for the fact that the men had engaged in forbidden sexual activity.

Going back to the video, Dr Shah also makes some helpful points about the development of Muslim legal traditions. Muslims wanted to live in a religiously-lawful way, and over the centuries Muslim legal experts discussed a great range of issues, including sexual relationships. He also explains that in Islamic legal tradition there has traditionally been room to accommodate local cultural norms, so that it has been, as he puts it, 'contextual'.

These legal experts' discussions were encapsulated in fatwas, legal opinions, issued by individual experts. Often the experts did not agree with each other, and so their opinions differed. Nevertheless some opinions or interpretations have become more influential and widely accepted, and others may be difficult to find. When it came to sex, the majority view did come to be that the only legitimate sexual relationship was between a married man and his wife (or wives) (and also between a man and female slaves). The four main Sunni legal schools agreed that sexual relationships between men were sinful, and three of them argued that they should be subject to capital punishment.

But the legal experts did not all agree with this. Dr Shah gives the example of the Iberian or Andalusian scholar Ibn Hazm (994–1064 CE). A 'poet, historian, jurist, philosopher and theologian', Ibn Hazm has been described as 'one of the greatest thinkers of Arabo-Muslim civilization' (Arnaldez, 2012, p. 1). Dr Shah explains that he had what were quite tolerant views on same-sex relationships, arguing that they were only a problem if they led to social disruption. If you are interested in learning more about Ibn Hazm there are some resources listed in the Further reading list at the end of this course.

In practice, before the nineteenth century it seems that extreme punishments were rarely inflicted on men who had sexual relationships with other men. Often what Kecia Ali, author of a book on sexual ethics and Islam, calls 'don't ask, don't tell' norms prevailed, and provided those engaging in them were reasonably discrete, such relations were tolerated and those participating in them were not prosecuted (2016, p. 107). If it did come to a court case, in practice judges often imposed milder punishments, and governments often introduced their own legal codes which prescribed much more lenient penalties.

## 2 Internal diversity in contemporary Islam

Lesbianism has rarely been illegal in Muslim-majority countries. But things have changed for men since the early nineteenth century. There are two main reasons for this.

Firstly, during the European 'Age of Empire', in many colonised countries, particularly those under British rule, laws criminalising sexual relations between men were introduced. These laws often remained in force when the Europeans left (Ahmadi, 2012, pp. 555–9; A.L., 2018).

Secondly, as you have seen, although Muslim legal traditions mostly accepted that sexual relationships between men were wrong, in practice they were often tolerated. In the later twentieth century, the gay rights movement developed in the West and Western governments began to decriminalise same-sex relations. This made it possible for some governments in Muslim-majority countries, Iran for example, to demonstrate their commitment to what they claimed were Islamic values (and thus win popular support) by criminalising men who engaged in same-sex relations.

As a result, in a number of Muslim-majority countries it is against the law for men to have sex with other men, and those who do may be punished by imprisonment and flogging and in some cases even the death penalty. But in other countries, Egypt for instance, same-sex relations are not actually illegal. However, police may harass and arrest gay men (and women). While ISIS was in control of northern Syria (2014–2019) some men suspected of being gay were thrown from buildings or stoned to death.

Many Muslim-majority countries, however, do not criminalise male sexual relationships, among them Turkey and Indonesia (apart from the province of Aceh in northern Sumatra where special rules apply).

This is just one example of the obvious point that Muslims do not necessarily all think and act alike.

### Activity 2

As you watch this second extract from the interview with Dr Shah, take a few notes about the main points.

Video content is not available in this format.





Provide your answer...

### Discussion

1. Dr Shah draws attention to Islam's diversity. Today and in the past, he suggests, Islam has been practised by people living in different cultures, so that for example, beyond the core practices and beliefs, Muslims have had a range of views about politics, how societies should be governed (and the way they practised their religion differed somewhat from one region to another).
2. He explains that 'progressive Muslims' are 'fed up' with the authoritarianism of many Muslim-majority states, and are asserting their right to interpret Islam for themselves, and taking advantage of new technologies and social media to challenge Muslim religious and political authorities.
3. He suggests that this is a difficult task because many Muslim-majority states are not very democratic. Here he draws attention to the example of the influential Saudi Arabian religious scholar Salman al-Ouda who was jailed by the government in 2017 and at the time of writing (2022) remains in prison.
4. He argues that this authoritarianism is not due to Islam itself – for him it's not religion that makes these states undemocratic and intolerant.

Dr Shah makes it clear that the relationship between Islam and democracy is a complicated one. Muslims around the world do not speak with one voice on this issue. Some argue that democracy as practised in 'the West' is unIslamic, but many others support democratic government and believe it is fully compatible with their religion.

If you are interested in learning more about Salman al-Ouda, also known as Salman al-Awda, there is a resource listed in the Further reading list at the end of this course.

You will recall the three characteristics of religion identified by Diane Moore with which this course began – religious traditions are internally diverse, they encompass all aspects of human culture and behaviour, and are dynamic and changing. You have seen that is true in the case of Islam.

## Conclusion

From the very early days of Islam, a central feature has been the ideal of 'engaging in lawful behaviour'. This means acting in religiously-approved ways in all areas of life, not just as regards worship but also as regards to diet, trade and sexual relationships (among other things). This is a good example of the way that religions can encompass all aspects of culture and behaviour.

Religions are also internally diverse, and an important feature of Muslim legal tradition has been the way it has developed a range of opinions and attitudes about all sorts of topics and issues. So for example, although the Islamic legal experts usually condemned male same-sex relations (and were largely silent about female same-sex ones), they did not always do so. Nor did they agree about the punishments that might be imposed on those who engaged in prohibited behaviours. In any case engaging in same-sex relations was not usually seen as a particular problem in Muslim-majority societies; men who were taken to court under these charges were not usually severely punished.

In the nineteenth century, however, things began to change. The British Empire in particular introduced laws criminalising same-sex activities in most of the countries it ruled. These laws were often inherited by the successor states. In some Muslim-majority countries governments began to persecute gay men to show that they were standing up for what they claimed were Islamic values.

As a result in some Muslim-majority countries male same-sex relations remain illegal and harsh punishments are sometimes imposed on those who engage in them. In others, however, gay people are not criminalised, and in recent years more liberally-minded Muslims have begun to challenge these restrictions and to call for more freedom generally and more democratic government, which they regard as being fully compatible with Islam. Like all religions, Islam is dynamic and changing.

### Questions for discussion

- Can you think of any other controversial issues on which Muslims may not speak with one voice?
- To what extent do you think internal diversity is found in other religious groups?

### Classroom activity

- Take an issue which might be controversial at your school, such as an aspect of the dress code or attendance policy or rules governing the use of mobile phones.
  - How far does there seem to be diversity of opinion on this subject within the classroom?
  - Would consulting the school rules help us to understand what pupils and staff actually think and how they behave?
  - Are there differences in opinion on controversial issues in your school? If so, might we compare this to the way we find a range of views on controversial issues in religious contexts?

### Mini research project

- You might want to identify some of the different types of government to be found in the Muslim-majority world today. Countries you might want to compare and contrast include Egypt, Indonesia, Malaysia, Morocco, Turkey, Somalia and Saudi Arabia.
- Explore further the diversity within Islam. You might focus on:
  - the differences between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims, or the beliefs and practices of Sufi Muslims
  - the diversity of Muslims within a non-Muslim-majority country, such as Britain.

### Useful organisations

[Hidayah LGBTQI+](#) is a charity which provides support and welfare for LGBTQI+ Muslims. It also promotes social justice and education to counter discrimination, prejudice and injustice, and offers confidential email, social meetings and educational material.

The [Inclusive Mosque Initiative](#) is 'an intersectional feminist mosque devoted to creating safer spaces for marginalised Muslims ... including women, nonbinary and queergender people'.

## What next?

Check out the [Religious Studies content on offer from OpenLearn](#).

Interested in taking your learning further? You might find it helpful to explore the Open University's [Religious Studies courses and qualifications](#).

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## Further reading

In addition to Dr Shah's *The Making of a Gay Muslim: Religion, Sexuality and Identity in Malaysia and Britain*, Palgrave Macmillan (2018), if you want to explore the issues raised further you might look at for example:

Adang, C. (2003) 'Ibn Hazm on homosexuality. a case-study of Zahiri Legal Methodology', *Al-Qantara* 24(1), pp. 5–31.

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[Diane Moore's Religious Literacy Project at Harvard University](#)

[Everything you need to know about being gay in Muslim countries](#)

## Acknowledgements

This free course was written by Hugh Beattie.

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