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The Role of Homosexuality in Classical Islam

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Appendix D - UNIVERSITY HONORS PROGRAM SENIOR PROJECT - APPROVAL

Name: Stefanie L. Martin

College: Arts & Sciences Department: Political Science

Faculty Mentor: Dr. Rosalind Gwynne

PROJECT TITLE: The Role of Homosexuality in Classical Islam

I have reviewed this completed senior honors thesis with this student and certify that it is a project commensurate with honors level undergraduate research in this field.

Signed: Rosalind W. Gwynne, Faculty Mentor

Date: April 9, 1997

Comments (Optional):

Ms. Martin has done an excellent job of integrating the disciplines of Quranic interpretation, political history, social history, and literature in an effort to plot the outlines of a topic upon which there is surprisingly little research. It appears that the field lags behind similar research in other cultural-religious areas, and I for one am indebted to Ms. Martin's work for alerting me to that fact. I shall refer future students interested in the subject to her paper as the source from which they should begin their own research.

Rosalind Gwynne

The Role of Homosexuality in Classical Islam

Stefanie L. Martin
University Honors Program
Advisor: Dr. Rosalind Gwynne
1996-1997

Abstract

In 610 C.E., the angel Gabriel revealed to Muhammad the first message from Allah. This revelation marked the beginning of a new religion that would soon become one of the major monotheistic traditions of the world: Islam. With time, Islam produced a new culture within the Arab world that was a synthesis of old and new traditions. In some cases, where old practices met new beliefs, controversies arose that were not easily reconciled. Several of these controversies persevere even today, such as the role of homosexuality in the classical Islamic period. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the role that homosexuality played in the early Islamic period with regards to the theological debates regarding homosexuality, as well as the records of homosexual practices within the various niches of the classical society.

The *Qur'an* and *hadith* provide the basis of Islamic beliefs as well as Islamic law. If these two sources made the theological position on homosexuality crystal clear, then there would not be a significant argument regarding the role of homosexuality in the Islamic religious sphere. Yet neither the *Qur'an* nor the *hadith* provide clear answers to the question surrounding homosexuality. Instead, one finds varying interpretations of the meaning of the *Qur'an* as well as blatantly contradictory *hadith*.

This paper takes into consideration the generally accepted interpretation of the *Qur'anic* passages related to homosexuality as well as an interesting line of argument that runs counter to what is generally accepted to be true. For most scholars, the *Qur'an* establishes that homosexual acts are prohibited, drawing from the multiple references to the story of Lot in the text. Yet an argument has emerged that questions this interpretation, contending instead that each story of Lot is intended to be an illustration of the awesome power of Allah rather than a prohibition against homosexual acts. While this argument has not gained general support, it finds some strength in the fact that with only one exception, each time that homosexuality is mentioned in the *Qur'an*, it is mentioned within the context of the story of Lot.

This paper deals with the social, theological, and legal issues concerning the role of

homosexuality in Islam. Due consideration is given to factors that may have encouraged homosexual acts, whether or not the prevalence of homosexual acts was influenced directly by Islam, what the social attitudes towards homosexuality were in the different aspects of society, and the ways in which homosexuality manifested itself within the society. Additionally, arguments focusing upon the interpretation of the *Qur'an*, the application of the *hadith*, the questions concerning Allah's mercy for offenders, and the application of law to homosexual offenders are outlined and discussed. In short, this paper looks at the overall role of homosexuality in the classical Islamic period.

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The Role of Homosexuality in Classical Islam

I. Background

Introduction:

It is generally accepted that societies tend to have laws concerning only those things that are relatively likely to occur. This phenomenon held true for the Islamic civilization as it came into existence in 610 Common Era (C.E.) with the first revelation of Allah to the Prophet Muhammad. The prevalence of homosexual practices in the pre-Islamic era prompted the emerging religion to attempt to establish an orthodox belief regarding such practices, as well as legal interpretations and punishments for violations. While many believe that the *Qur'anic* stance on homosexuality was set forth clearly, neither the practice of, nor the debates surrounding, homosexuality ceased to exist. Homosexual behavior was still prevalent in many elements of society in the classical Islamic world. Acceptance or condemnation of homosexuality during this period was, nonetheless, highly subjective. Ultimately, the role of homosexuality in classical Islam must be discussed in two distinct segments: 1) the theological debates, and 2) the occurrences of homosexuality within various niches of society.

Pre-Islamic Practice:

Throughout the pre-Islamic world, homosexuality was not an uncommon practice. Incidents of homosexuality are recorded from Mecca to the Turks (later the Ottoman Turks) and beyond. One theory regarding the spread of homosexual practices finds root in the nature of conquest in pre-Islamic and early Islamic times. Additionally, the proliferation of homosexual practices is attributed to various things including the crowds in the markets that brought people of many different regions and customs together, the travelling done by merchants, and pagan practices.

Prior to the emergence of Islam, a series of invasions swept through the region, forever changing the land and people left in their wake. Such invasions inevitably placed great strains upon the preexisting settlements as well as the settlements of the conquerors. These stresses produced integrated of two or more separate traditions and generated new customs and practices. S.D. Goitein argues:

> It [the spread of homosexuality in pre-Islamic and early Islamic times] was the outcome of the superimposition of a caste of warlike conquerors over a vast defenseless population. The steamrollers of the Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, Macedonian, and Roman conquests had crushed all the independent nations of the Ancient Near East. What remained was human dust, a population that was not accustomed to bearing arms and was unable to fight. Any conqueror, whether Arab, Turk, or Mongol, could take what he liked. After the endless supply of girls of all races, colors, shapes and personalities had been tasted, the oversatiated and refined appetites had to he satisfied elsewhere. Thus the cult of the ephebes, or attractive male youths, originally was a privilege of the men in power. But as often happens with social mores, the example of the ruling class filtered down, and became a style of life for the entire community. [1]

Goitein's argument provides a logical basis for explaining why homosexual practices would later be most prevalent among the wealthy and elite Muslims of the Islamic world. The culture from which Islam evolved was one that recognized the "cult of the ephebes" and related homosexual practices as a status symbol - a sign of wealth and/or power.

Around the time of the advent of Islam, homosexual acts were still practiced amongst the wealthy and the ruling classes. One researcher found that "the Quraysh tribe, to which Muhammad belonged, included many passive homosexuals - so numerous that they were proverbial." [2] To understand the significance of this, one must bear in mind that the Quraysh were one of the wealthier, more powerful tribes of Mecca. Members of the Quraysh served as the guardians of the highly reputed pagan shrine, the *Ka'bah.* [3] The *Ka'bah* was one the richest and most important focal points of pagan worship and the pagan economy. To be charged with

its care was to be acknowledged as one of the most powerful tribes in Mecca. The very clan from which the Prophet emerged was of a rich and powerful tribe that was known to employ homosexual practices as a display of their wealth and status.

Homosexual practices were a part of many aspects of pre-Islamic life. In some cases, homosexuality was so ingrained in the culture that "initially, the religion of the Turks was Shamanism, and homosexuality was regarded as a mark of superiority among the highest ranking clergymen, who were Shamans. Homosexuality spread rapidly and at a certain point it became impossible for a non-homosexual to become a clergyman." [4] Homosexuality had been a part of the cultures and societies in various forms for some time, and in many cases had successfully become an integral part of the society. A majority of the population was not likely to engage in homosexual practices, yet the practices existed in so many forms in the society that a majority of the population could not claim ignorance of these deeds. The pre-Islamic culture was not unfamiliar with homosexuality; there was just cause for implementing laws dealing with its practice. In the realm of Islamic theology, this was accomplished through religious laws that systematized the proper behavior for a Muslim while delineating improper behavior.

II. The Theological Debate

Orthodox Islamic beliefs were first enumerated in the revelations to the Prophet which were later recorded in the *Qur'an*. The *Qur'an* is considered to be the "living word of Allah." Additionally, the *hadith* served as sources of authority in determining the Muslim view of homosexuality. The *hadith* are a "vast body of material extant in the form of sayings and anecdotes which comprise the later community's collective memory of the Prophet and his companions." [5] Through the *Qur'an*, the initial prohibitions were introduced, along with a vague sense of the punishments to be imposed on those who violated these prohibitions. The *hadith* served to reinforce the teachings of the *Qur'an* as well as to provide additional sources of information and authority for the Islamic laws concerning homosexual practices. Ultimately, due to varying circumstances and societal pressures, there emerged different interpretations of the *hadith* that provided for punishments that ranged the spectrum in their degree of severity yet formed no consensus.

The *Qur'an*:

The *Qur'an* is traditionally believed to be clear in its injunction against homosexual practices. Homosexuality was defined, within the Islamic framework, as *sodomy*. With only one exception, homosexuality is alluded to exclusively in terms of sodomy in conjunction with the story of Lot and Sodom in the *Qur'an*. Lot was recognized by the Muslims as one of the past prophets of Allah. In the sura of The Prophets (21:74-75), Lot is described in the following manner as one of the past prophets: "To Lot We gave wisdom and knowledge and delivered him from the city that had committed deeds of abomination; surely they were men of iniquity and evil. We admitted him to Our mercy: he was a righteous man." [6] While many believe that through the story of the people of Lot the injunction against homosexuality was established and a general declaration of punishment proclaimed, there is a growing body of scholarship and

thought, similar to that in Christianity, that argues that no such proclamation against homosexuality exists in the context of the *Qur'an*.

The *Qur'an* is believed to condemn sodomy in several different ways. In the sura of The Poets (26:166), it states: "Will you fornicate with males and abandon your wives, whom God has created for you? Surely you are great transgressors." [7] The sura of The Spider (29:28-29) records a dialogue between Lot and the people of Sodom:

> And we sent forth Lot to his people. He said to them: 'You commit indecent acts which no other nation has committed before you. You lust after men and assault them on your highways. You turn your very gatherings into orgies.'
>
> But his people's only reply was: 'Bring down the scourge of God upon us, if what you say be true.' [8]

From these and other suras, one could infer that homosexuality was implicated in the destruction of Sodom.

Scholars seeking to argue that the *Qur'an* does not effectively condemn homosexuality *per se* have developed a two-pronged attack on traditional *Qur'anic* exegesis. On the one hand, the argument is that references to the Biblical story of the sins and destruction of Sodom are nothing more than an illustration of God's awesome power, not an injunction against homosexual practices. On the other hand, the argument is also made that because the *Qur'an* lacks recommendations of specific punishments for homosexual acts, it is not truly condemning the practice. [9]

Allah is repeatedly referred to in Islam as "the compassionate" and "the merciful"; suras and *hadith* alike proclaim the awesome mercy of Allah. Yet Allah's power and wrath are not neglected either. In the stories of Lot and Sodom, there is a heavy emphasis upon Allah's compassion in sparing Lot and his family as well as Lot beseeching the people of Sodom to repent and ask for Allah's mercy and forgiveness. It appears likely that with homosexuality

never being clearly named as the sin of the people of Lot, the story of Lot and Sodom was included as a demonstration of Allah's mercy and compassion rather than as a condemnation of homosexuality. The *Qur'an* is so explicitly detailed in other areas (an example being the specificity as to the number of wives a man may have and under what conditions he may rightfully have them), that it seems highly unlikely that such a vague prohibition should be used against a sin that could potentially incur capital punishment.

Among the mentions of the story of Lot, the clearest expression in the *Qur'an* of a condemnation of homosexuality is found in the sura of The Heights (7:80-84):

> And Lot, who said to his people: "Will you persist in these indecent acts which no other nation has committed before you? You lust after men instead of women. Truly, you are a degenerate people."
>
> His people's only answer was: "Banish them from your city. They are men who would keep chaste."
>
> We delivered him and all his kinsfolk, except his wife, who stayed behind, and let loose a shower upon them. Consider the fate of the evil-doers." [10]

This segment of the *Qur'an* leaves very little doubt that male homosexuality was the crime of the people of Sodom that caused Allah to destroy the city. Homosexuals are referred to as degenerates and evil-doers. This mention of Sodom is the most damaging to the argument that homosexual references in the *Qur'an* were more incidental than strict prohibitions and condemnations. Yet one question about the absolute prohibition that this sura seems to generate is whether the prohibition is because of the "inherent evil" of homosexuality or because it threatened the ideal of reproduction and was, in that regard, regarded as being tantamount to chastity. If homosexuality is being roughly equated with chastity in this sura, then the argument persists that homosexuality, in and of itself, was not strictly prohibited by the *Qur'an.*

One thing that is made explicitly clear is that the consequence of not heeding Allah's

warnings and commandments is having to bear the force of Allah's wrath. Repeatedly, when the people of Sodom scorn Lot and challenge Allah, there is a display of Allah's power in bringing punishment for failing to heed Allah's warnings. The destruction of Sodom as an illustration of Allah's wrath and power is best seen in the sura of The Moon (54:33-39):The people of Lot disbelieved Our warnings. We let loose on them a stone-charged whirlwind which destroyed them all, except the house of Lot, whom We saved at dawn through Our mercy. Thus do We reward the thankful.

> Lot had warned them of Our punishment, but they doubted his warnings. They demanded his guests of him. We put out their sight, and said: "Taste My punishment, now that you have scorned My warning." And at daybreak a heavy scourge overtook them. "Taste My punishment, now that you have scorned My warning!"[11]

This story is saturated with the rage that Allah experienced as the people of Sodom ignored his commandments and ignored the warnings that he sent unto them through Lot. The end result of this story is not a condemnation of the sins of the people, but instead a lesson in Allah's wrath. Implicit in the story is the idea that, had the people of Sodom heeded Allah's warning and Lot's warning, they would not have experienced the rage-filled punishment that was ultimately inflicted upon them.

In the lone passage in the *Qur'an* where homosexuality is referred to outside of the framework of Sodom, the call for punishment is issued (4:15): "If two men among you commit indecency, punish them both. If they repent and mend their ways, let them be. God is forgiving and merciful." [12] This is the only direct mention that the *Qur'an* makes with regards to punishments for sodomy The punishments and penance for both major and minor sins and transgressions are made explicit in the *Qur'an*, yet there is no mention of a specific punishment for sodomites, not even an indication of the severity of the transgression. Given the specificity of the *Qur'an* in other matters, the question of whether Allah truly intended the story of Lot to be

used as a prohibition against homosexuality is a valid one. Since the *Qur'an* remains vague regarding the punishments associated with homosexuality, attempts were made to derive them from the *hadith.*

The *Hadith*:

In instances in which the *Qur'an* remained silent on an issue that the community was later faced with, the stories and anecdotes traceable to the Prophet were employed as a source of authority and knowledge. The *hadith* were rigorously checked and maintained by scholars that specialized in biography of the Companions of the Prophet and the subsequent transmitters of *hadith.* When the *Qur'an* failed to produce a clear punishment for those found guilty of engaging in homosexual acts, the *'ulama'* and the community naturally turned to the *hadith* in search of guidance.

Ibn 'Abbas transmitted a *hadith* in which he quoted the Prophet as saying, "Whoever is found conducting himself in the manner of the people of Lot, kill the doer and the receiver." [13] In this *hadith*, sodomy is regarded as a capital crime, equivalent to *zina*, or forbidden sexual practice. Yet at the same time, Ibn Ishaq transmitted a *hadith* in which the Prophet is quoted as saying, "Cursed are the ones who do the deeds of the people of Lot." [14] Like the *Qur'an*, this *hadith* makes no mention of killing the sodomites. The question of whether or not sodomy should be regarded as *zina* is one that is as old as the Islamic religion itself.

It seems then, that at the heart of the debate over the punishment for sodomy lies the question of whether Allah will extend his mercy and compassion to the sodomites if they repent. Ibn 'Abbas's transmission appears to argue for the negative, while Ibn Ishaq's transmission argues in the affirmative. Another *hadith*, whose *isnad* was not cited, states that:

> There are seven people whom God will not look at on resurrection day, he will not purify them, nor assemble them together with the rest of the universe. They will be the first to enter the fire - unless they repent, for God forgives whoever repents. They are the masturbator, the active and passive sodomite, the inveterate

> drinker of wine, the one who beats his parents till they cry for help, the one who offends his neighbors till they curse him, and the man who has intercourse with his neighbor's wife. [15]

This hadith argues that the mercy of Allah will be bestowed upon the sodomite who repents, yet it does not deal with whether or not the offender should be killed for his crime. The question of whether or not Allah would extend his mercy and compassion to sodomites remained unresolved in the hadith.

When questions surrounding the specific punishments for homosexual acts were not to be adequately and unambiguously resolved within the *hadith*, responsibility for an applicable resolution of these questions fell upon the legal community. The schools of law were charged with debating and fleshing out solutions according to their own traditions as cases arose that required such solutions. These solutions varied according to the sources of authority that each school recognized, but ultimately they were considered to be binding upon the adherents of a given school in the absence of a higher decision.

The Schools of Law:

C.E. Bosworth suggests that the main distinction that was made when determining punishment was whether the sodomites were married or celibate. Generally, when the sodomite was celibate, it was recommended that the full punishment not be applied. [16] The severity of the punishment assessed often depended on various circumstances within the schools of law, the community, and the society at large. Ultimately, though, the schools of law reduced and/or enforced the punishments according to their own judicial opinions.

Abdelwahab Bouhdiba observed that, "of two fornicators who have committed the same sexual offence (sodomy, for example, or rape of a non-nubile girl), the legally married individual would incur the maximum penalty, but the non-married would receive the minimum. What is at issue is not a penal offence or a contravention of the law, but a formal, absolute taboo." [17] A man, in the Islamic tradition, is allowed to take more than one wife if he is able to provide

equally for all of his wives and satisfy them equally without showing preference or favor. Mandatory egalitarian treatment of a man's wives is established in the sura of Women (4:3): "If you fear that you cannot treat orphans with fairness, then you may marry other women who seem good to you: two, three, or four of them. But if you fear that you cannot maintain equality among them, marry one only or any slave-girls you may own." [18] The trend observed by Bouhdiba tends to suggest that the heart of the issue focused upon the male's marital status and whether he was neglecting his marital duties by indulging in homosexual acts. If the man was unmarried, then the community's attitude towards behavior was slightly negative, while a married man would be punished using the full force of the law.

Part of the difficulty in categorizing sodomy in a legal context stems from the fact that there was no homogeneous punishment. Each law school prescribed different degrees of punishment for sodomy. Ibn Hanbal and the Hanbali school of law came the closest, judging by the severity of the punishments, to grouping sodomy with other *zina*. He insisted upon stoning as the punishment for sodomites while other schools of law were content with flogging as the means of punishment. Ibn Hazm is noted as having gone as far as to reduce the punishment to a mere ten lashes. [19]

Various reasons have been suggested for this inconsistent application of punishment. Among them, one of the more compelling is the legal requirements necessary for finding someone guilty of sodomy. In order to find someone guilty of sodomy or other sexual misconduct, there had to be four male, free, adult, responsible Muslims who saw the illicit act and were able to certify that they saw with their own eyes the male organ inside the "female organ" as though it were a "brush in a jar of liquid makeup." [20] In lieu of four witnesses, confessions were an acceptable form of evidence whereby someone could be found guilty. The problem with confessions, though, was that they could be elicited from people, whether innocent or guilty, by employing means of manipulation, pressure, or even torture. These extremely strict requirements, coupled with the harsh penalties for perjury, created an atmosphere in which it

would be difficult to establish the level of proof needed for absolute punishment to be inflicted. The evidence was incredibly difficult to get, leaving an element of uncertainty present should one attempt to apply full punishment without having absolute evidence according to the criteria necessary for finding someone guilty of sodomy or other illegal sexual acts.

While issues surrounding homosexuality were being debated in theological circles, homosexual practices were prevalent in several different niches of the classical Islamic society. From the royal courts and the harems to some Sufi orders, evidence of homosexual practices existed during the era of classical Islam. Although these practices were of a common nature, they were of different motives as well as different levels of acceptability.

III. Homosexual Practices Within Classical Islamic Societies

The Royal Courts:

Records from the royal courts of the classical Islamic era are typically more abundant than records from the lives of common people. As a result, there tends to be more evidence available to support claims of homosexual practices within the courts than within the villages. To conclude that the courts were more likely to engage in sodomy than were the peasants would be to arrive at an invalid conclusion. Instead, the existence of sodomy must simply be studied from those records that are available, bearing in mind the potential fallacies that one might unintentionally come to regard as true.

Muhammad al-Amin

Records from the Abbasid caliphate under Muhammad al-Amin indicate that homosexual practices reached even the highest levels of the court at times. What is unique about the case of al-Amin is that records regarding homosexuality exist not only from his reign as caliph, but also from his younger years in the royal court. These records serve to illustrate the manner in which the royal court would deal with an elite who displayed homosexual tendencies at various stages in his life.

Eunuchs were often the means by which the elite engaged in sodomy, as was the case with al-Amin.

> . . . Amin soon separated himself from the company and influence of his family, both men and women, and gave himself over wholly to dissipated pleasure in the company of his eunuchs. He dressed some of these latter as girls and organized them into a group of blacks whom he named "The Ravens," and another group of whites who were called "The Grasshoppers." [21]

Caliph al-Amin's obsession with eunuchs was not simply an element of his adult life. Records indicate that while al-Amin's father, Harun ar-Rashid was caliph, al-Amin's mother,

Zubayda, was forced to resort to deception in order to "tame" her son's predilection for eunuchs. " . . . She selected pretty young girls of slim stature, had their hair cut like that of boys, dressed them in jackets with tight belts, and had them appear before the young Amin." [22] That Zubayda felt compelled to suppress her son's homosexual tendencies at a young age implies that homosexuality was not acceptable in this royal court, even at the highest levels. Perhaps this was for religious reasons or perhaps it was a pragmatic reaction to the threat that a homosexual caliph posed to the continuity of the royal dynasty.

In the case of al-Amin, the caliph not only abandoned his obligations to his family, but also to his empire. It is noted that "his personal relationship to these eunuchs became a major scandal, first in the capital city and later throughout the empire." [23] Al-Amin became the popular target of the poets of his empire as well as that of the scandalous gossip throughout the empire. In acting upon his predilection for eunuchs, al-Amin brought shame and disgrace to his court and his land through the scorn and gossip that developed. Even when sodomy reached the highest levels of this royal court, it was not condoned by the people, and was, in fact, a subject for ridicule by the members of the society. The caliph was responsible for perpetuating the glory and honor of his realm, not for drawing down upon it the condemnation and ridicule of the others within the society and within other societies. Any weakening of the caliph's power, whether it was actual weakening or merely perceived weakening due to the growth of criticism, ultimately made it easier for al-Amin's brother, Ma'mun to depose him.

Murad IV

In another incident, homosexuality was used for political gains within the royal court. In 1623, Murad IV was proclaimed Ottoman Sultan at the age of ten. During his youth, Murad's mother, Kiusem, ruled. "She chose his grand viziers and took one other extraordinary step for a doting mother: she encouraged the young prince towards homosexuality, in the belief that she would be spared the dangerous consequences of interference by harem favorites." [24] In this

case, the political power of the harem is demonstrated as Kiusem was willing to encourage her son to engage in sodomy in order to circumvent the potential influences and rivalries of the harem, because of her role as the head of the harem by virtue of being the Sultan's mother. Whether or not the threat was real, the fact remains that Kiusem was willing to use sodomy as a political foil to the power of the harem.

Medieval Spain:

The Muslim conquests of the Mediterranean region and Spain in the early eighth century and the subsequent city-based society that emerged produced many cases of homosexual activity along with a surprisingly high level of tolerance. Records of homosexual activity in Muslim-controlled medieval Spain range from details of slave relationships to encounters in the highest levels of royalty and nobility. Historian John Boswell, in researching homosexuals in western Europe from the beginning of the Christian era to the fourteenth century, recorded that, "[In early medieval Spain] every variety of homosexual relationship was common, from prostitution to idealized love. Erotic verse about homosexual relationships constitutes the bulk of published Hispano-Arabic poetry." [25] Unlike other parts of the Islamic world, medieval Spain offers a wide body of poetry and songs by and about members of many different social classes, though a large portion of the writings still reflect homosexual practices of the royal courts. Within these works are poems and tales of homosexuality within the court of al-Mutamid as well as the court of al-Mutamin, the life of the preeminent poet ar-Ramadi, the poetry of Ibn Sahl, a Jewish convert to Islam, and the rise to power of Mubarak and Mudhaffar.

Al-Mutamid

Medieval Spain was little more than a loose confederation of large states such as Seville, Saragossa, and Valencia. The eleventh-century Muslim king of Seville, al-Mutamid, is recorded as having exhibited homosexual proclivities on more than one occasion. Al-Mutamid expressed

his love for various men through poetry as well as by bestowing upon the men that he favored political power. He wrote of one of a cupbearer:

> They named him Sword; two other swords: his eyes!
> Both he and those two are ready to slay me!
> Would not one slaying by sword have quite sufficed?
> Yet by his eyebrows two further blows were dealt!
> I made *him* captive; his charming eyes in turn
> Made *me his* captive: now we *both* are masters, *both* slaves!
> Oh Sword, be kind toward a captive of love,
> Who asks not, as a favor, to be freed by you! [26]

This poetic profession of his infatuation with his page suggests that the king feared neither condemnation by the people for his statement of homosexual lust nor chastisement by the religious leaders.

More rare in the records of classical Islam is an instance of a member of the nobility falling in love or expressing homosexual feelings towards a non-servant or non-slave member of the society. This, along with other evidence, has led many scholars to believe that many of the homosexual practices of the classical Islamic society were a means by which wealth and dominance were flaunted and enjoyed. Not all homosexual activities during this period were meant as expressions of wealth and power, though. Boswell, for instance, notes that "al-Mutamid also fell in love with poet Ibn 'Ammar, from whom he could not bear to be parted, 'even for an hour, day or night,' and whom he made one of the most powerful men in Spain." [27] Ibn 'ammar expressed his feelings for al-Mutamid as well as the status of their relationship through his poetry. Not long after being banished from the royal court because of a "revelation" that he was destined to one day kill al-Mutamid, Ibn 'Ammar wrote of him:

> His glamour surpassed the beams of the full moon,
> His face put the moon's firmament to shame!
> During the night of union there was wafted
> To me, in his caresses, the perfume of its dawns,
> My tears streamed over the beautiful garden
> Of his cheeks to moisten its myrtles and lilies,
> Until Fate gave me to drink the cup of sad parting,

> Which intoxicated me with fumes that clear not away;
> I stood far away from him like a pilgrim in Mina,
> Where love of hearts would be cast instead of pebbles,
> Perplexed: he blinded my eye which was his heaven,
> And caused to melt my heart which was his dwelling! [28]

Ibn 'Ammar's love for al-Mutamid was expressed through his poetry, even after he was banished, just as al-Mutamid used his position and wealth to shower gifts and power upon the object of his desire. Yet for al-Mutamid, the desire itself did not originate as an expression of his power. While abuse of wealth may have been a large impetus for homosexual activity, it was not the sole cause; some of the homosexual relationships of the classical Islamic period were, in fact, genuine expressions of homosexual sexual orientations.

Al-Mutamin and Ar-Ramadi

Medieval Spain was known for its mixture of minority Christian and majority Muslim populations. Whereas Christians were discouraged from engaging in relationships with pagans, evidence from medieval Spain suggests that Christian-Muslim relationships were not forbidden or even harshly looked down upon. To the contrary, a large portion of Hispano-Arabic erotic poetry contains a mixture of Arabic and Christian terms and is written about interfaith relationships. [29] Just as homosexuality was not restricted to any given social class, neither was it restricted exclusively to couples of the same religion.

Information and records originating in medieval Spain draw heavily from the poetic literature of the age. Where records of the royal courts were most prominent in other regions of the Islamic world, poetry is most prevalent from Muslim Spain. One of the most prominent Muslim poets of tenth-century Spain was ar-Ramadi. Ar-Ramadi not only fell in love with a Christian, but went so far as to adopt Christian ways, culminating in his conversion to Christianity. Boswell notes, " . . . [ar-Ramadi] not only began to wear the distinctive clothing of the Christian minority when he fell in love with a Christian youth but was even converted to Christianity, embracing his lover in front of a priest after the ceremony." [30] Another record

notes that ar-Ramadi went so far as to wear the *zunnar* required of the Christians and also refused to drink from his wine cup before making the cross over it. [31] Ar-Ramadi was more likely to be in danger of being executed as *kafir* than for *zina* given the lenient social attitudes of the time regarding homosexuality.

Poetry is among the great lasting legacies of medieval Spain. Hispano-Arabic poetry has been used in studying various different aspects of Spanish society during the period. Ar-Ramadi frequently used poetry to express his feelings for young males, such as this poem given to the guard of a prison in which ar-Ramadi became infatuated with a black male:

> Your prisoner is one of those whom love deprives of reason;
> My bosom is scorched by a fire worse than glowing coal:
> He is a crescent, but does not rise in the sky,
> He is a gazelle, but does not live in the desert:
> I looked into his eyes and became drunken;
> No doubt, eyes are like wine in their charm;
> I talk to him so that he will answer me, but I
> Do so on purpose to hear him scatter pearls:
> I am his slave, he is the lord, just like his name:
> I have a full share of his company, and he is mine! [32]

Ar-Ramadi expresses in this poem his infatuation with the young man and uses the imagery of a slave and master that was also found in al-Mutamid's writings. Poetry such as this expressing homosexual attraction and desire was not an uncommon theme for the poets or the common people of medieval Spain.

The eleventh century saw more than one Muslim king with homosexual predilections. While al-Mutamid was captivated by the gaze of a page and romancing Ibn 'ammar, al-Mutamin, king of Saragossa, was in love with one of his own pages. Like other Muslims of Spain who took Christian lovers, al-Mutamin is recorded as having been in love with his Christian page. It stands to reason that, given the atmosphere of medieval Spain, al-Mutamin was in greater danger of being scorned or persecuted for having taken a Christian lover than for having taken a homosexual lover at all.

Ibn Sahl

Medieval Spain boasts a long list of many accomplished poets. From Saragossa to Valencia and beyond, poetry thrived as a means of artistic, political, and emotional expression. Nearly two centuries after al-Mutamid wrote from his court in Seville, Ibn Sahl, a Jewish convert to Islam, established himself as a poet and became quite accomplished in Seville and later in Ceuta. Not only was he a well-known poet, but also a renown homosexual. In one of his poems, Ibn Sahl wrote:

> Did the gazelle of Hima realize that it kindled
> Fire in the heart of a lover in which it had made its dwelling?
> For now his heart is filled with a burning fire
> Like a glowing charcoal, enlivened by the blowing of the breeze![33]

While it is unlikely that Ibn Sahl ever blatantly stated that he was a homosexual, it is obvious that he did not attempt to hide his homosexuality, but instead expressed his love, lust, and infatuation openly in his poetry. In another poem, he wrote:

> I have had no authority in my love ever since he has been lodged in
> my soul in the place of my breathing.
> From him there comes a kindling of the fire in my heart, which
> burns what it wills at all moments.
> Yet [that fire] in his cheeks is a cooling and peace-giving agent,
> though it produces harm and a conflagration in the heart.
> I fear and revere in him, being under the authority of passion, the
> lion of the thicket, yet I love him since he is a young fawn.
> I said [to him] when he appeared wearing a mark to distinguish
> him in combat while he was guarded by his glances:
> "O you who have taken my heart as booty lawfully won in battle,
> grant the love union in exchange for the *khums*!" [34]

Speaking in this poem of a military or combat experience, Ibn Sahl makes no secret of his attraction to and desire for another man with whom he serves. He even goes so far as to compare his heart to the one-fifth sum of all treasure claimed during battle that reverts back to the Muslim community. Without a doubt, Ibn Sahl was a very expressive poet who, through his work, expressed his homosexuality while gaining literary popularity throughout Seville and

Ceuta. Rather than finding his works censored because of their explicit homosexual themes, Ibn Sahl probably found that more people questioned the depth and sincerity of his conversion to Islam from Judaism than they did his poetic talents or the validity of the emotions in his poetry.

Mubarak and Mudhaffar

The poets, writers, and musicians of medieval Spain were known for celebrating homosexual love. Triumphs as well as declarations of love were immortalized by these artists. One such example is the relationship of Mubarak and Mudhaffar and their eleventh-century rise to power in the kingdom of Valencia. The two men were freed slaves who worked their way up in the civil service of the royal court of Valencia until they came to rule together. Along the path of their ascent to power, Mubarak and Mudhaffar fell in love. "Their joint rule was characterized by admiring Muslim historians as a relationship of complete trust and mutual devotion, without any trace of competition or jealousy. . . . " [35] Poets, writers, and musicians who typically glorified homosexual love in their own realms of Spain flocked to the royal court of Mubarak and Mudhaffar to celebrate, through their works, the love of the couple. The historical description of Mubarak and Mudhaffar's relationship lends weight to Boswell's assertion that, "Although the *Qur'an* and early religious writings of Islam display mildly negative attitudes toward homosexuality, Islamic society has generally ignored these deprecations and most Muslim cultures have treated homosexuality with indifference, if not admiration." [36] It is clear that, at the very least, the Islamic culture and society of medieval Spain did not hesitate to glorify and celebrate homosexual relationships of a quality as high as that of Mubarak and Mudhaffar's.

Lesbianism:

Female homosexuality took on several different forms in the classical Islamic period. Much of what is known today about the role that homosexuality played in this aspect of Islamic

society has been distilled from amongst the numerous volumes, both scholarly and speculative, on women and their positions, functions, roles, and rights within Islamic society in the classical era. The very nature of these works casts a shadow of doubt and uncertainty over an examination of lesbian activity during this period. This is due largely in part to the imaginations of many Western would-be observers during the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. Generally speaking, this body of information can be divided into two categories: that dealing with the harems and that dealing with the remainder of society.

The Harems

Little is known about the prevalence of homosexuality within the harems, for the harems were kept relatively sequestered from view by outsiders. The likelihood of an European traveller gaining entrance to the harem was very slim. As a result of the European Orientalism booms of the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, a vast body of pseudo-authoritative information about the harems was generated. [37] Speculation by Westerners often generated themes of eroticism, frustration, or a sense of the forbidden within the harem. These themes were quite possibly exaggerated in the minds of would-be observers by the taboos of Islam and the harem specifically (such as the avoidance of so much as a gaze) and the very denial of admittance. [38] Despite this barrier, information about the role that homosexuality played in the harems may still be gleaned.

During the Ottoman Empire, a Venetian envoy named Ottaviano Bon observed of the harem that, "Now, it is not lawfull for any one to bring aught in unto them, with which they may commit deeds of beastly uncleannesse; so that if they have a will to eat cucumbers, they are sent in unto them sliced, to deprive them of the meanes of playing the wantons." [39] This evidence of Ottoman court law provides strong suspicions of lesbian activities within the harem despite the watchful eunuchs present there. A society does not have laws for those things that it does not anticipate occurring, yet the Ottoman empire had laws regarding the preparation of foods of the

harem in order to prevent homosexual practices. This implies, more than anything, that homosexual activity had been known to occur in the harems, yet the frequency of such occurrences cannot be determined nor can reasonable speculation about such frequencies be rationally undertaken.

It was said, though, that the girls of the harems "indulged in lesbian love affairs 'as often as the pages [training for war or diplomacy] indulged in homosexuality'." [40] Lesbian affairs were no doubt the easiest and among the more common of the vices of the harem. The likelihood of meeting the necessary requirements in order to convict members of the harem of sexual misconduct was not very high either because it did entail either having four free, male Muslims as witnesses to the actual acts or managing to elicit confessions from the participants. As a result, homosexual activity within the harem had a greater probability of going unpunished in this life. That homosexual activity in the harems was far less likely to be punished in this life is in no way indicative of the acceptability of such practices.

One cannot conclude that homosexuality in the harems was acceptable simply because it often went unpunished. In all actuality, accounts from Arab historians suggests that punishment for homosexual activities in the harem was swift and harsh. Deviation from the accepted norms of the society and religion of the times were not tolerated, even within the harems. Among the records is an extreme example of the punishment inflicted upon homosexual members of the harem of the Abbasid Caliph Musa al-Hadi. In this incident, al-Hadi presented his couriers with the perfumed, decorated heads of two of the women of his harem who had been decapitated after being found engaged in a lesbian act. [41]

The decapitations that occurred under the rule of Caliph al-Hadi have given birth to an interesting debate over their significance. Like the purpose of the *Qur'anic* passages, the purpose of these beheadings has come into question. An issue that has been raised with regards to this example is whether the lesbian affair was the reason for the decapitation or whether that affair served merely as an opportunity for the caliph to demonstrate his sense of property rights

over the women of his harem. [42] If the former is the true reason, then it can reasonably be concluded that homosexuality in the harem was not openly acceptable. If the latter is true, then nothing can be said about homosexuality in the harems, other than that it was generally scorned, but that it might not have been punished as an act in and of itself.

Common Society

Gender segregation is often thought to have played an important role in determining whether homosexual practices would be prevalent in the harems of the classical Islamic period. Yet the harems were not the only places in which these factors and forces could potentially shape the sexuality of the early Muslims. Society at large was equally susceptible to forces such as gender segregation and a subservient role for women in some aspects of Muslim intellectual and interpersonal life. The perception of the role of women in classical Islamic society, coupled with the Western view of women in the harems as sexually frustrated creatures, has been highlighted in many studies and "authoritative" works of varying periods in history.

In the mid-twentieth century, researchers still hypothesized about the role of sexual frustration and gender discrimination as the impetus for acts of homosexuality in the classical society. In 1957, for example, two medical researchers contended that gender segregation of the society and the low status of women within that society were largely responsible for the development of homosexuality amongst Muslim women. [43] Many of these studies and records are dismissed by scholars because they draw heavily from Western Orientalist writers who created what they desired to portray when they were unable to find it naturally. In order for gender discrimination to be seriously considered as a factor in generating homosexual tendencies, there must first be evidence from that era that is credible.

Indeed, there are surviving records from the classical Islamic period that indicate that the effects of the perception of women in Islamic society may have indeed been a factor that led to homosexual practices amongst some of the women. One of the clearest statements of gender

discrimination as it relates to homosexuality comes from a sexological treatise written in the twelfth century by a Jewish convert to Islam:

> There are also women who are more intelligent than the others. They possess many of the ways of men so that they resemble them even in their movements, the manner in which they talk, and in their voice. Such women would like to be the active partner, and they would like to be superior to the man who makes this possible for them. Such a woman does not shame herself, either, if she seduces him whom she desires. If she has no inclination, he cannot force her to make love. This makes it difficult for her to submit to the wishes of men, and brings her to lesbian love. Most of the women with these characteristics are to be found among the educated and elegant women, the scribes, Koran readers, and the female scholars. [44]

This statement makes it clear that some women intentionally turned to lesbianism out of intellectual impulses. Unable to accept the sexual, intellectual, and interaction roles assigned to them as females, some women opted to shun the masculine aspect of the world by turning to lesbian relationships in which they could act out the roles that they were otherwise forbidden in the male-dominated society. It is notable that it was typically the upper class and the well-educated women who made such a choice rather than the poor and uneducated. Homosexuality, then, appears to have been a means by which those women who could afford to do so were able to shrug off the traditional roles to which they were otherwise confined.

Religious Mysticism:

Another niche in society in which records of homosexual practices exist is in religious mysticism, especially that of some Sufi orders. Often, sodomy was incorporated into the mystical practices of these orders as a form of divine love. "In the sessions of mystical initiation, 'the accolade was frequently given by the adults to the young initiates behind and in front. . . . Some felt immense pleasure and relaxation in this. This is what is called the relaxation of the poor. And they dare to claim that this was the love of God. . . . " [45] As an element of mystical

practice, sodomy was more readily accepted by the Sufis. There was a strong disdain among the orthodox Muslims towards these Sufi practices, yet the key was that sodomy in this form was deemed acceptable by some of the Sufi elements of society.

Religious teachers also found forms of homosexuality to be acceptable within their field. Teachers of the *Qur'an* were often too poor or too nomadic to be able to marry or to afford prostitutes. In such cases, it was not uncommon for the teacher to select a few boys from his class with whom he would satisfy his desires. Autobiographical records of such practices reveal that the parents of the chosen boys, as well as the boys themselves, found the practice commonplace and tolerated it in order to avoid embarrassing the religious instructors. Thus, in some Arabic civilizations, especially those of North Africa, homosexuality was accepted casually as a service or form of payment in exchange for the *Qur'anic* teachings of the religious leader. [46]

The *Hammams:*

An interesting area in which homosexual practices are recorded as having been relatively common involved the public baths or *hammam.* These public baths were similar to the harems in that homosexual practice was fostered by the ready access to other participants. Whereas the royalty and the elites were able to indulge in homosexual practices, if so desired, by virtue of their wealth and power, the poor found such opportunity for indulgence in the public baths. Additionally, poor women found the baths convenient because there they were largely out from under the control of their husbands and fathers.

Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq was named ambassador to Constantinople by Ferdinand I of Austria in the mid-sixteenth century. Busbecq was a distinguished diplomat and a very prolific and well respected author. In 1560, during a visit to Constantinople, Busbecq wrote a long letter on Ottoman life and manners in which he discussed homosexual practices amongst women at the *hammams*. How he gathered the information for his letter is not made completely clear, yet he

nonetheless stated:

> . . . The great masses of women use the public baths for females, and assemble there in large numbers. . . . so cases occur of women falling in love with one another at these baths, in much the same fashion as young men fall in love with maidens in our own country. Thus you see a Turk's precautions are sometimes of no avail, and when he has succeeded in keeping his wives from a male lover, he is still in danger from a female rival! The women become deeply attached to each other, and the baths supply them with opportunities of meeting. Some therefore keep their wives away from them as much as possible, but they cannot do so altogether, as the laws allow them to go there. [47]

Unlike intellectual women who reputedly turned to lesbian practices as a means of gaining power and control of their lives while seeking self-actualization, and unlike the women of the harem who are rumored to have engaged in homosexual behavior out of sexual frustration, the women who engaged in lesbian activities at the *hammams* did so out of a genuine love and natural homosexual impulses. The baths served to gather large numbers of women together and provided the opportunity for them to bond deeply and fall in love. In this case, then, homosexual practices served not as a tool for a higher purpose, but were an end in themselves.

"The homosexual element in the practices of the hammam did not escape the attentions of the fuqaha' and the censors. And indeed the poets have often sung of their love of boys, aroused by the constant spectacle of so many beautiful naked bodies exhibited to view." [48] There was a general awareness of the stigma of the public baths, and in fact, some baths during the reign of the Ottomans were known specifically as homosexual baths and were guarded by Jannissaries. [49] The very fact that these baths were guarded by the military elite tends to suggest that either homosexual indulgences in the *hammam* were not an acceptable social practice in the society of the time or that aggressive homophobia existed in the classical Islamic society as it exists in modern societies.

IV. Conclusion

The pre-Islamic Arab society was not one in which homosexual practices were a foreign concept. On the contrary, homosexuality actually played a vital role in some of the early religions. Yet, with the emergence of Islam, some scholars came to view homosexuality as being condemned by the faith that was rapidly becoming the most powerful and predominant religion in the region. Islam, with its new moral code and social standards, altered the cultural values of the region. Though the actual punishments to be applied to sodomites were a major source for debate among the *'ulama'* and the jurists of the various schools of law, one thing remained clear: sodomy was no longer acceptable across the board, but was instead considered by some to be a grave sin against Allah.

Despite the strong orthodox Islamic stance, homosexual practices were still prevalent throughout the various niches of society. These practices could be condemned, ignored, or even accepted. Homosexuality served as a tool by which intellectually motivated women could free themselves of the inferior role that the male-dominated society relegated them to or as a tool by which jealous mothers could avoid political competition from within the harem. Homosexual relationships that epitomized love and devotion even came to be celebrated by the preeminent poets and rulers of medieval Spain.

Generally speaking, homosexuality was strongly condemned by orthodox Muslims, yet it brought little, if any, detriment "to honor in high society." [50] Theological debates raged amongst the *'ulama'* and other scholars, yet to no avail. Even today ambiguity exists in interpreting the meaning of the *Qur'an* and the *hadith*. While the *Qur'an* was argued by some to have created a prohibition against homosexuality and sodomy, these were still troublesome issues for the Islamic faith during its classical period. Even as the religious leaders debated issues concerning homosexuality, actual practice never ceased to exist, whether it was amongst the nobles or the poor women at the *hammams*.

V. Notes

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[3] Waines, David. *An Introduction to Islam.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 9.

[4] Yuzgan, Arslan, "Homosexuality and police terror in Turkey," *Journal of Homosexuality*. 24 iii-iv (1993) 160.

[5] Waines, David. *An Introduction to Islam.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 11.

[6] Dawood, N.J., trans., *Qur'an*, 5th rev .ed. (London: Penguin Books, 1993) 231-232.

[7] *Ibid.*, 262.

[8] *Ibid.*, 280.

[9] Warren J. Blumenfeld and Diane Raymond, *Looking at Gay and Lesbian Life*, rev. ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988) 185.

[10] Dawood, N.J., trans., *Qur'an*, 5th rev .ed. (London: Penguin Books, 1993) 115.

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[12] *Ibid.*, 62.

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[17] Bouhdiba, Abdelwahab. *Sexuality in Islam.* 1975. trans. Alan Sheridan. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985) 15.

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[21] Abbott, Nabia. *Two Queens of Baghdad: Mother and Wife of Harun al-Rashid.* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946) 210-211.

[22] Walther, Wiebke. *Women in Islam.* (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishing, 1993) 173.

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[26] Nykl, A.R. *Hispano-Arabic Poetry and its Relations with the Old Provencal Troubadours.* (Baltimore: J.H. Furst Company, 1946) 143.

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[37] Alloula, Malek. *The Colonial Harem*, trans. Myrna Godzich and Wlad Godzich. (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1986) 95.

[38] *Ibid.*, 96.

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[41] Walther, Wiebke. *Women in Islam.* (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishing, 1993) 174.

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