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Sexual Diversity in Islam: Trends in Lived Religious Innovation

There is a small but growing number of cultural outputs with sympathetic, non-judgemental portrayals of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer (LGBTQ) Muslims. These include plays, films, TV shows, and fiction and non-fiction writings produced by LGBTQ Muslims as well as non-LGBTQ-identifying Muslims who advocate interpretations of Islam that are often labelled “inclusive”, “liberal”, or “progressive”. These outputs are emerging in national contexts where Muslims constitute the majority as well as where they are a minority. They are produced amidst dominant interpretations of Islam that consider homosexuality and/or transgender expression grievous sins or transgressions, including by Muslim state authorities that stigmatise and criminalise LGBTQ expressions and pro-LGBTQ activism. Orientalist and Western stereotypes – including critiques of these – also continue to sustain a “clash of civilisations” rhetoric about the relationship between Islam and LGBTQ issues. This “clash” rhetoric has effectively turned “LGBTQ” into an intensely polemical acronym and obscures the nuances of cultural outputs that explore Islam and sexual diversity. This paper aims to provide a slightly different perspective on the idea of the so-called LGBTQ phenomenon as embodying a so-called clash between Islam and the West or its cognates – liberalism and secularism. It examines recent cultural outputs on Islam and sexual diversity as examples of lived religious innovation amongst Muslims enabled and constrained by neoliberalism and neo-colonialism. I draw upon more than a decade of participant observation and academic research on Islam and sexual diversity in Malaysia and Britain.



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Dr Shanon Shah is a Visiting Research Fellow at the Department of Theology and Religious Studies, King's College London, where he also earned his doctorate in the sociology of religion. He conducts research on minority religions and alternative spiritualities at the Information Network Focus on Religious Movements (Inform), a research charity, and teaches religious studies at the University of London's Divinity programme, both based at King's. His research and teaching interests include the ethnographic study of religion, contemporary Islam and Christianity, minority religions and alternative spiritualities, gender and sexuality, popular culture, social movements, and environmentalism. He is the author of *The Making of a Gay Muslim: Religion, Sexuality and Identity in Malaysia and Britain* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

Shanon is also the director of Faith for the Climate, a national charity focusing on collaborative action by faith groups to address the climate and ecological crisis. He used to be a multiple award-winning singer-songwriter, playwright, and journalist in his native Malaysia.