

U.S.

Gay Muslims Find Freedom, of a Sort, in the U.S.

By NEIL MacFARQUHAR NOV. 7, 2007

SAN FRANCISCO — About 15 people marched alongside the Muslim float in this city's notoriously fleshy Gay Pride Parade earlier this year, with various men carrying the flags of Egypt, Lebanon, Palestine and Turkey and even Iran's old imperial banner.

While other floats featured men dancing in leather Speedos or women with scant duct tape over their nipples, many Muslims were disguised behind big sunglasses, fezzes or kaffiyehs wrapped around their heads.

Even as they reveled in newfound freedom compared with the Muslim world, they remained closeted, worried about being ostracized at the mosque or at their local falafel stand.

"They're afraid of the rest of the community here," said Ayman, a stocky 31-year-old from Jordan, who won asylum in the United States last year on the basis of his sexuality. "It's such a big wrong in the Koran that it is impossible to be accepted."

For gay Muslims, change may come via a nascent body of scholarship in minority Muslim communities where the reassessment of sacred texts used to damn homosexuality is gaining momentum.

In traditional seats of Islamic learning, like Egypt and Iran, punishment against blatant homosexual activity, not to mention against trying to establish a gay

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president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, spoke at Columbia University. But far more leeway to dissect the topic exists in places where gay rights are more protected.

As a rule, gay Muslim activists lacked the scholarly grounding needed to scrutinize time-honored teachings. But that is changing, activists say, partly because no rigid clerical hierarchy exists in the West to bar such research.

Nonetheless, gaining acceptance remains such a hurdle that Muslims in the United States hesitate. Imam Daayiee Abdullah, 53, a black convert to Islam, was expelled from a Saudi-financed seminary in Virginia after the school found out he is gay. His effort to organize a gay masjid, or mosque, in Washington failed largely out of fear, he said.

“You have these individuals who say that they would blow up a masjid if it was a gay masjid,” he said. Mr. Abdullah and other scholars argue that there is no uncontested record of the Prophet Muhammad addressing homosexuality and that examples of punishment would surely exist had he been hostile.

Mirroring the feminist school of Islam, gay advocates pursue a holistic interpretation that emphasizes accepting everyone as equally God’s creation.

Most Koranic verses treating same-sex relations are ambiguous, said Omid Safi, an Islamic studies professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. “They are talking about an ‘abomination,’” Professor Safi said, “but what an abomination is remains open to interpretation.”

Since the primary Koranic verses used to condemn homosexuality also suggest male rape, the progressive reading is that the verses revile using sex as domination, said Scott Kugle, an American convert and university professor who specializes in the topic. The arguments are not entirely modern; some are drawn from a medieval scholar in Andalusia, once a seat of enlightened Muslim governance, he said.

The classical attitude toward lesbians is even murkier, Mr. Kugle added, because sex was defined as penetration.

Hostility is rooted in the Koranic story of Lot, which parallels the biblical

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said condemned homosexuals.

“This is the main sin in Islam,” Mr. Jalal said, describing how the town housing Lot’s tribe was lifted high into the sky and then dropped, killing all in the town before they were buried under what is now the Dead Sea. “He sent the flood to clean the earth from AIDS. There were no doctors at that time, but God knew they had a virus.”

All sects mandate capital punishment, he argued, although others differ. “Sunni, Shiite, they all agree that they have to be killed. But who does it? Not me or you, only by law.”

Muslim clerics reject being gay as biologically coded and advise anyone with homosexual stirrings to avoid temptation. They see America as rife with it given practices like open gym showers.

The hostility pushes some gay Muslims to interpret for themselves or to withdraw from the faith. For Rafique, a 56-year-old Southeast Asian Muslim in San Francisco, resolution came through a combination of medieval mystic poetry and individual spiritual efforts endorsed by Sufi Muslim traditions.

Renowned poets wrote odes glorifying handsome boys. Some were interpreted as metaphors about loving God, but some were paeans to gay sex. Rafique and others argue that homosexuality became criminalized only under European colonialism.

“From the 10th to the 14th century, Muslim society used to be a far richer mix of the legal, the rational and the mystic,” said Rafique, an anthropologist. “They looked at sexuality as one aspect of life’s many possibilities, and they saw in it the hope for spiritual insight. I came across this stuff, and it helped me reconcile the two.”

Some mosques with a Sufi orientation extend a rare welcome to gay Muslims.

Ayman, the parade organizer, said his previous life in Jordan was marked by fear. Arrested at 17 after a sexual encounter in a public building, he said the police wrote “manyak,” a homosexual slur, into his file. He denied being gay, but the

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He is convinced that a 22-year-old gay friend who died after a fall from an apartment building was the victim of an “honor” killing meant to clean the family’s reputation. “I still feel like I’m a Muslim; I don’t accept that anyone insults the faith,” said Ayman, who avoids attending mosque. “When I read what it says in the Koran, then I fear Judgment Day.”

A 26-year-old from Saudi Arabia who took the first name Liam after rejecting his faith said that as a teenager he fought his homosexuality by becoming a religious zealot. He eventually accepted his sexuality while at college in Colorado, but moved to the Bay Area because gay life in the kingdom was too depressing.

But a 39-year-old burly, bearded computer consultant who left Saudi Arabia to live in the United States said the cosmopolitan city of Jidda had a thriving gay underground. In other Arab states, he said, it is rare to find men who are both religious and gay, but the high numbers in Jidda made them relax somewhat. “They don’t care about sex and alcohol, but they do avoid pork,” he said.

The consultant, trying to reconcile being gay and Muslim, divides his sins into the redeemable and those warranting hellfire. “Anal sex for either a man or woman is wrong, so when I really think about it, I tell myself not to have sex,” he said, describing a failed four-year experiment with celibacy. “I live with what I am doing, but I don’t want to live in a double standard, I don’t want to go through life unhappy.”

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