Edge Hill RE Summer School

Lucy Newman

***“What are the different interpretations of sexuality and desire within LGBTQ+ religious communities?”***

# Project Aim

This project seeks to understand different religious and secular views on religion, desire, and homosexuality through religious, social-cultural and anthropological lenses. The project seeks to understand different hermeneutical perspectives on sexuality within religion to present religion and culture in a way that is vibrant, diverse, and flexible rather than a bound entity. In line with this approach, I have adapted three lessons as part of a scheme of work within the AQA GCSE Religious Studies theme of Religion, Human Rights, and Social Justice. The scheme explores historical and religious perspectives of desire and sexuality with a focus on Islam. The lessons also touch on modern themes of gender, sexuality, and intersectionality using personal testimonies of individuals and a critical approach and interpretation of scripture to analyse, evaluate and examine a range of religious and non-religious worldviews.

# Lesson One – What is prejudice and discrimination?

**Objectives**

* Understand what prejudice and discrimination are and how they might influence individuals in society.
* Examine different religious teachings on equality and inclusion with a worldviews approach.
* Consider how religious teachings on equality may be interpreted and understood in different ways.

**Key words**

Prejudice – unfairly judging someone before the facts are known, holding biased opinions about an individual or group.

Discrimination – action or behaviour that results from prejudice.

**Activity - Think. Pair. Share. (Critical Thinking)**
Aim: To develop an understanding of the many ways religious passages can be interpreted.

1. Consider the quote below

***“People, we created you all from a single man and a single woman, and made you into races and tribes so that you could get to know one another” Qur’an 49:13***

1. Write down your own understanding of what this quote means in relation to prejudice and discrimination.
2. Share your definition with your partner and class.
3. As a class discuss some of the questions below:
* *Do you agree or disagree with anybody else’s interpretation of the quote? Why?*
* *Why did you interpret or understand it in that way?*
* *How does the quote apply to life and society today?*
* *What information did you use to develop your view?*
* *After having shared interpretations as a class, would you change your interpretation? Why?*

# Lesson Two – What are different religious teachings on homosexuality and desire?

 **Objectives**

* Develop an understanding of the history of homosexuality in the context of Islam.
* Examine religious teachings on homosexuality and homophobia in traditional teachings and modern contexts.
* Analyse different interpretations of the story of Lut and what the consequences of different perspectives might be.

**Key word**

Homosexual - to be sexually attracted to members of the same sex.

**Critical Evaluation – The Story of Lut**

Prophet Lut (“Prophet Lot”) was born and raised by his uncle Prophet Ibrahim, may peace be upon him. Prophet Lut loved, respected and believed in Ibrahim’s message of one God, Allah. Ibrahim, together with Lut, often travelled far, across land and sea, trying to invite others to Islam.

Lut received the divine decree of Allah that Lut had been chosen as a Prophet and Messenger for the people of Sodom. Allah instructed the new Prophet to travel to the city of Sodom and summon the people back to the worship of Allah.

Sodom was a thriving city that was visited by many travellers, merchants and businessmen for trade. However, Sodom was also the most corrupt city with the highest criminal activity during that time. Travellers passing Sodom were often waylaid and robbed of their belongings, and sometimes were mercilessly murdered and would engage in homosexuality. The people of Sodom were immensely proud of their conduct, spoke openly about it, and engaged in these immoral behaviours out in the open.

Pleased with the Prophethood and his new mission, Prophet Lut soon settled in Sodom and began to devise ways to bring his people into Islam. He was well-aware that his nation was the most corrupt nation of that time; but he held firm faith and hoped and prayed that they would soon see the error of their ways and enter into the path of Allah.

Soon Prophet Lut approached the men of the city and reminded them of their Lord: “Will you not fear Allah and obey Him? Verily! I am a trustworthy Messenger to you. So fear Allah, keep your duty to Him, and obey me.” Puzzled, the men of the city began discussing amongst themselves: “This man has entered our city, and is telling us to cease what we are doing? Clearly, he is gaining something out of this!” Prophet Lut replied: “No reward do I ask of you for it. My reward is only from the Lord of the Worlds.”

Prophet Lut then broached the matter of homosexuality and informed them that it was indeed an immoral practice. He said: “Do you approach males among the worlds, and leave those whom your Lord has created for you as your wives? Nay, you are a people of transgressing!”

Prophet Lut then informed his people that he would never agree to be a part of this such a practice, and warned them of a severe punishment from Allah. He said: “I am indeed, of those who disapprove with severe anger and fury your action.” The men and women of Sodom became very angry at Lut’s speech; they began to discuss amongst each other, planning to drive Lut away from their city.

Prophet Lut became distressed. After years and years of inviting people to Islam, not one person in Sodom had entered Islam. The only Muslim household in Sodom was Lut’s house and not all its occupants were Muslims—Lut and his daughters were steadfast in their religion, but his wife continued to be among the non-believers.

Meanwhile, Allah sent three angels, including Angel Jibreel, disguised as men to Prophet Ibrahim’s house as guests. Ibrahim, who failed to recognise the angels, prepared a grand feast for his guests. But his guests refused the meals offered to them. Prophet Ibrahim became fearful; he asked: “Who are you?” The angels replied: “Do not be afraid! We are the angels of Allah. We have been sent to the people of Lut and we have been sent to give you glad tidings of a son possessing much knowledge and wisdom.”

The angels then proceeded towards Sodom disguised as handsome young men. Prophet Lut approached the men and welcomed them to city of Sodom. He intended to convince the men to leave the city for their own safety. But Prophet Lut was too embarrassed to ask the guests to leave, so he guided the guests to his home ensuring that none saw the three men.

Lut’s wife, a non-believer, saw the men as they entered her house, together with her husband, Lut. She hurried to the men of the city and informed them that Lut had three attractive, young men in his house. The men rejoiced at the news and slowly gathered outside the house of Lut and began pounding on his door. Lut shouted: “Do not disgrace me concerning my guests. Is there not among you a man of reason?”

The whole nation of Sodom had now gathered at Lut’s doorstep. They grew impatient by the minute and began breaking down his door. Feeling agitated, Lut called out to his people: “These are my daughters to marry lawfully you must act so.” The men responded: “You have already known that we have no interest in your daughters; and indeed, you know what we want.” Prophet Lut became helpless against the corrupt people. “If only I had against you some power or could take refuge in a strong power”, he thought.

Angel Jibreel then stepped out of Lut’s house and struck the men causing all men to lose their eyesight. Shocked and enraged, the men shouted: “What’s this magic that just hit us? Where did this come from? O Lut! You are the one behind this. You will see what we will do to you tomorrow.” The blind men then returned to their homes plotting to destroy Lut the following day.

Allah commanded Lut: “Set out with your family during a portion of the night and let not any among you look back, except your wife…” Prophet Lut, together with his daughters, left Sodom during the night.

As the morning dawned, a loud, piercing cry ensued through the city that shook the occupants with great pain and fear. Jibreel then grabbed the nation from the edge of his wing, raised them high up, twisted the land, and crashed it to the ground. Allah then caused the skies to rain down stones of hard clay - ending the vain lives of the occupants of Sodom, including Lut’s wife.

Prophet Lut, who left Sodom with his daughters, returned to his uncle, Prophet Ibrahim. Together with Ibrahim, Lut continued to spread the message of Allah till his death.

(Source: <https://myislam.org/story-of-prophet-lut/>)
 **Comprehension Questions:**

1. Who is Lut and what is his role?
2. What three ‘immoral behaviours’ are committed by the people of Sodom?
3. Why did the people of Sodom not like the work of Lut?
4. What is the role of Luts wife throughout this text?
5. What does Allah want to people of Sodom to do?

**Critical Evaluation and Discussion**

Traditional understandings of the story of Lut

* For some Muslims, the story shows the homosexuality between men will result in punishment for Allah.
* Same sex relationships and criminality in the story are seen to threaten the stability of society. Consider that Lut refers to marriage of his daughters in a correct way. “*These are my daughters to marry lawfully you must act so”*
* Homosexuality is considered wrong as it does not produce children, as a wife might.

Alternative interpretations of the story of Lut

* Scott Siraj al-Haqq Kugle, an American Muslim scholar who in 2010 published a book-length critical examination of the issue of homosexuality in Islam.
*(Reference: Kugle, Scott Siraj al-Haqq (2010) Homosexuality in Islam: Critical Reflections on Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Muslims. Oxford: Oneworld Publications.)*
* The story of Lut should not be read in isolation but taken into context alongside the whole of the Qur’an. The Qur’an positively endorses diversity.
* ‘Desire’ is often narrowly interpretated as sexual acts but within the Qur’an desire has sexual and non-sexual connotations for example greed as a desire of the people of Sodom.
* Kugle argues the story is fundamentally about power and the sexual assaults is only one expression of the people of Sodom who want to deny Lut and drive him from their city.
* The sins of the people of Sodom are wide ranging and not always sexual e.g. robbery, murder. It is these sins the people are also being punished by Allah. The people of Sodom also reject Islam after multiple attempts, another sin to be punished by Allah.
* The story does account for the treatment of women in the story. Lot’s wife (or an old woman) was destroyed in the end along with the wicked people of Sodom. For Kugle, the destruction of Lot’s wife is another indication that the sin of the people could not have been male homosexuality but rather a wider immorality.

**Extended Writing Activity**

*Evaluate this statement.*

*“The story of Lut should only be used to educate people against homosexuality”.*

* One paragraph for this statement
* One paragraph against this statement
* Your conclusion – what is your view and why?

# Lesson Three – What LGBTQ+ identities exist within religion?

**Objectives:**

* Develop an understanding of different identities that exist within LGBTQ+ communities.
* Examine different approaches to sexuality within Islamic communities and the role culture plays in shaping individual identity.
* Explore what the impact of homophobia might be from the perspective of religious and non-religious worldviews.

**Key Words:**

LGBTQ+ - Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Questioning or Queer

Homophobia - the fear or dislike of someone, based on prejudice or negative attitudes, beliefs or views about lesbian, gay or bi people. This can also include denying somebody’s lesbian, gay or bi identity or refusing to accept it. Homophobia may be targeted at people who are, or who are perceived to be, lesbian, gay or bi.

**Recap: What are traditional views on sexuality within Islam?**

* Islam traditionally forbids same sex relationships and does not recognise same sex marriage.
* Homosexual couples cannot naturally have children, which is seen as an important part of life and marriage.
* Most Muslims believe that same sex marriage is unnatural and against the will of Allah
* The story of Lut is often used to demonstrate why homosexuality is wrong but how else can it be interpreted? Why is this important today?

**What are the different views on LGBTQ+ communities within Islam?**

* Today, some Muslims are challenging traditional views of sexuality and marriage.
* There are many examples of LGBTQ+ Muslims being rejected, and sometimes punished, in society. Some Muslims claim it is impossible to be both Muslims and LGBTQ+
* For some the question of belief and relationship with Allah and your sexuality are different parts of your identity. For others, it is important to remember that Allah has a plan for us all and created us how he intended.
* Some Muslims are more tolerant and support Muslims who are LGBT and do not exclude individuals from the community.
* Some Muslims accept the scientific evidence that homosexuality is not a choice but a natural sexual orientation.

**What are alternative Muslims attitudes?** **Guided Reading.***Read the sources below and answer the following questions.*

1. What is the main messages in the source?
2. Why might some Muslims disagree?
3. How can the argument help tackle homophobia?

Source A)

**New Horizons in British Islam**

Dilwar Hussain, advisory board member and chair of New Horizons in British Islam, a charity that works on Muslim identity, integration and reform, told *PinkNews* that LGBT+ inclusion within religious groups is, for him, an issue of “**moral** consistency”.
“I think the irony is that at the core of all religious teachings, they are about how we can be better human beings,” he said. “And yet, unfortunately, the trajectory that many religions have taken over the centuries is that somehow they’ve arrived to the place that has been terribly cruel and harmful to people [who are LGBT+]. If I want to be a religious person and advocate a position for saying that the world should be a better place, I don’t think I have much moral authority to do that if I’m being discriminatory and prejudicial towards other people, to my neighbors and fellow human beings.” Encouraging people to be more open to inclusion “is about putting ourselves in the shoes of other people” and “being able to see the pain of other people”.

(Source: <https://5pillarsuk.com/2020/12/17/reformist-muslims-back-call-for-decriminalisation-of-homosexuality>)

Source B)

**Inclusive Mosque Initiative**
Dervla Shannahan, one of IMI's co-founders, writes about their quick growth and overwhelming success.

“I’m interested in being part of a space and community that is identifiably Muslim, with a political and social conscience, where Islam is practiced in its diversity and is non- judgmental and where justice is at its core, utilizing a variety of methods to achieve this.” During salaah, not everybody wants to pray, or pray in the same way (such as differences between Sunni-Shia prayer) and we welcome that as it is the diversity of the Ummah.

It was so heartening to hear the issues that people were going through, struggling to find places to be heard, and people to talk to. The audience was really so varied, it was quite emotionally, and spiritually charged, and it seemed that everyone really got a lot from it. Some of the attendees may never come to an IMI social dinner, for example, but left the event that day somehow more connected to Islam. Using personal experience of religious practice as a way of exploring space and faith”

(Source: <https://muslima.globalfundforwomen.org/content/open-source-islam>)

Source C)

**The Queer Muslim Project**
Robbie describes his interpretation of Islam as a trans person.

“Many stories of immigration are not linear. I was born in Russia, where my parents immigrated in the 90s when there was an influx of Bangladesh immigrants during the Soviet Union for free higher education and labour. I later moved to live with my mom in Saudi Arabia, then moved to Bangladesh, before finally settling in Canada at the age of 19.

My mother was my first introduction to Islam. Although at first, I found it grueling to learn Arabic, and embrace the traditions, I learned that she gave me a path to resilience – another language to connect to the universe. Coming out as a trans person I knew that if anyone would understand how I felt and see inside my heart, it would be God.

Being Muslim and a queer artist also allows me to reclaim parts of Islam and the art that came out of it like Sufi poets that I love like Rumi, Khalil Gibran, Hafiz who preached art, love and following your heart and desire to reach God. Being a musician, I recently read that the Blues scales have come to use in North America through enslaved African Muslims who sang the Quran notes. There is a deep artistic influence that Islam has on our art world.

Embracing my Muslim heritage as queer person, shows the possibilities and breaks stereotypes of what it means to be Muslim and the huge diversity within Islam that gets overlooked or often erased.” (Robbie, he/him)

(Source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CtMKYfEPguH/>)

# End of Unit Reflection Questions.

1. What type of prejudice and discrimination might LGBTQ+ religious people experience and why?
2. Is their only one way to interpret religion – if so, how?
3. Could religion be more inclusive of people from the LGBTQ+ community?
4. Why is it important to tackle homophobia?
5. What can we learn from exploring different points of view?