Introduction

If I’m going to end up in hell then I’m going to end up in hell, but God is the judge and not human beings.

~Fatima, a transgender volunteer with Imaan in London

Now this is very bizarre, but through gay life I came closer to Islam.

~Rasheed, a gay volunteer with Habibi Ana in Amsterdam

The voices of Muslims who are gay, lesbian, and transgender are rarely heard. Their voices have been silenced in the past. Now if they speak, they are expected to express contrition. Yet they stand up against those who denounce them. The quotes above capture the tenor of the voices of activists who volunteer to run support groups for lesbian, gay, and transgender Muslims. They strive to live out Islam even as they acknowledge their sexual orientation and gender identity. The fact that they speak is surprising to some. What they say will startle many.

This book presents interviews with a range of gay, lesbian, and transgender Muslim activists, weaving their voices together to offer a composite picture of their struggle. Theirs are voices of an oppressed minority group within its religious community, a group which struggles to achieve liberation from oppression. Their struggle has psychological, social, political, and spiritual dimensions. Their experiences arise from diverse circumstances but are unified in reclaiming Islam as their own
religion. Their voices are brought together here to offer an “oral history” of the nascent movement to assert their rights and insist on their dignity. This movement is not about being “out” as opposed to being “in the closet.” Rather it is about finding ways to live out one’s Islam with dignity and integrity by reconciling one’s sexuality and gender with one’s faith.

This volume argues that gay, lesbian, and transgender Muslims can reconcile their sexual orientation and gender identity with Islam. But this reconciliation requires active struggle, struggle that is sustained only by camaraderie with like-minded individuals and the solidarity of support groups. Activists working with such support groups employ a variety of strategies to promote social change at many levels, from personal transformation to political assertion to religious reform. Activists’ efforts through such support groups can flourish in societies with strong systems of legal protection for individual rights, such as in countries with democratic constitutions. The activists we will meet in this book all live in countries with democratic constitutions and social systems with a “secular” separation between political rule and religious belief: the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and South Africa.

Muslims constitute a small religious minority in these countries. These nations’ democratic constitutions grant lesbian, gay, and transgender citizens access to certain rights and protection from oppression, allowing them the freedom to think, speak, and organize. This freedom allows them to critically engage with their religious identity, family authorities, and community norms in ways that are not possible in many Muslim-majority countries. This context allows these activists to make full use of their multiple social positions: they are members of a minority religious community and ethnic group, but also members of a minority defined by sexual orientation or gender identity, even as they are citizens of a secular state. Their modes of activism reveal how they strive to balance these competing demands and find in this complex situation resources and opportunities for protecting their rights and fostering their welfare.

This book documents these strategies or “modes of activism” as they are made manifest in the life stories of gay, lesbian, and transgender Muslims who volunteer with support groups. These “modes of
activism” are patterns of action, decision, and compromise. They reveal the underlying identity formation of gay, lesbian, and transgender Muslims in the context of belonging to minority Islamic communities in secular democratic states. Before we proceed to engage with their experiences, however, a number of terms need to be clarified, even those that seem basic—such as activism, subjectivity, sexual orientation, gender identity, and Islam.

Modes of Activism and Theories of Subjectivity

One goal of this book is to demystify the term “activist.” Activists are ordinary people who strive to change the social relationships around them to achieve some modicum of justice. Some of those whose stories are related here are leaders while others are supporters, seekers, or healers. Some ways of struggling are more visible than others, but activism is not limited to those who appear in the media, organize protests, confront politics, or raise funds. A lesbian Muslim who struggles to attain an education and economic independence from her family is an activist. A transgender Muslim who insists on being able to pray in her mosque despite an imam’s disapproval is an activist. A gay Muslim who strives to succeed in a secular profession while being open about his identity is an activist. Anyone who actively struggles with her or his existential plight is an activist.

This book identifies “modes of activism” through which such activists approach identity formation, religious loyalty, and social change. These modes are strategies through which they approach a complex problem; yet unlike strategies that are rationally adopted after calculation, these modes of activism are intuitive and from the gut. Those interviewed may not rationally think about their modes of activism or identify them as strategies for identity formation and social change. They are patterns of thought-and-action rather than plans of action. This book identifies six major modes of activism:

- Engaging religious tradition
- Challenging family and community
- Adapting religious politics
- Adjusting secular politics
Forging minority alliances
Journeying toward individual identity

Though they are listed separately, these modes are not mutually exclusive. Activists combine them according to their personality and situation.

This book is divided into six chapters, each of which focuses on one mode of activism, analyzing the lives of those whose struggles and decisions illustrate that mode. It shows how these modes of action combine and interweave as the activists make sense of their lives and activities. The everyday struggles of the social activists documented in this book contribute to the ongoing debate about sexual orientation and gender identity in Muslim communities. In the academy, this debate has become even more heated with the publication of Joseph Massad’s *Desiring Arabs*, which analyzes the discourse of sexuality and civilization in Arab societies after colonialism. Massad contends that gay and lesbian identity is imposed upon Arab and Middle Eastern societies as part of a “gay international agenda” of American neoimperialism in the region. His contention is polemic and he accuses Arab lesbian and gay activists in Muslim-majority countries like Egypt and in the West of succumbing to false consciousness foisted upon them by Western interests that exploit them in the guise of protecting their rights. This book documents the lives of the kinds of activists whom Massad denounces, intervening in this ongoing scholarly and political debate. This intervention aims to restore humanity to activists who are struggling to live dignified and integral lives as gay, lesbian, or transgender Muslims, even as they are silenced by Islamic authorities and denounced by intellectuals like Massad, who appear more concerned with ethnic solidarity than with insuring the security and welfare of vulnerable members of the ethnic groups he purports to defend.

Massad’s scholarship is important in this debate because he claims the place of the much lauded Arab cultural critic, Edward Said. In *Orientalism*, Said mobilized the theories of Michel Foucault to argue that Western colonial powers engineered the creation of knowledge about Arab and Middle Eastern societies in order to dominate them not just in terms of political power but also cultural production, artistic imagination, and discursive interaction. Everyone working in the fields of Islamic Studies and Middle Eastern Studies is indebted to Said, though
he has been justifiably critiqued for selectively using Foucault's ideas while constructing an ahistorical binary opposition between Western powers and Eastern peoples. Massad claims the mantle of Edward Said, yet instead of listening to critiques of Said and learning from them, Massad has exaggerated Said's theoretical errors. *Desiring Arabs* claims to follow in Said's footsteps, but it jettisons the theoretical concerns of Foucault in order to sketch a Manichean struggle between postcolonial Arabs and the Western imperium driven by American military interests and UN declarations.

This study of gay, lesbian, and transgender Muslim activists—some of whom are Arabs—complicates Massad's contentions. It returns our attention to Foucault by raising issues of subjectivity and agency in the lives of Muslims who belong to sexuality minorities. There are several scholars working on Islamic and Arab communities whose engagement with Foucault is much more useful than that of Massad. This volume is theoretically indebted to Saba Mahmood and Talal Asad, and the life stories of gay, lesbian, and transgender Muslim activists it documents should be read within the context of their engagement with Foucault. Mahmood and Asad try to preserve the best of Foucault's theories while shedding his Eurocentric bias and restoring a humanistic concern about the rights of vulnerable persons and communities.

From Talal Asad's work, this book adopts the idea that religious practice and secular participation—in national politics or human rights advocacy—are not contradictory loyalties. Asad's discourse analysis of secularism finds religious concepts and concerns deeply enmeshed with secular politics from the early-modern era to contemporary times.¹ His work informs the analysis here of Muslim activists who question religious custom from the viewpoint of human rights and who simultaneously critique their secular nation for not embracing ethnic and religious minorities. These activists' strategies of complex identity negotiation cross and recross the assumed barrier between religious and secular commitments, forcing the one to dialogue and be accountable to the other.

From Saba Mahmood's work, this volume takes up a renewed engagement with certain parts of Foucault's theory about subjectivity and ethical formation. Foucault stresses that subjectivity is not a private space of self-understanding, but that it forms in response to formative practices,
social constraints, and moral codes that exist prior to the individual, such that subjectivity is best understood as a modality of power. Foucault calls “moral subjectivization” the process of “developing relationships with the self, for self-reflection, self-knowledge, self-examination, for the decipherment of the self by oneself, for the transformations that one seeks to accomplish with oneself as object.” Many scholars use Foucault's theories to emphasize the overdetermined nature of subjectivization—that subjectivities are formed by power relations set up by discursive formations in society, a process in which individuals have little choice or agency. Joseph Massad's work is an example of this kind of scholarship.

But Mahmood shifts the discussion to underemphasized parts of Foucault's theory that allow subjects to exert agency as they react to moral codes and transform social relations. She writes, “For Foucault, the relationship between moral codes and modes of subjectivization is not over-determined, however, in the sense that the subject simply complies with moral codes (or resists them). Rather, Foucault's framework assumes that there are many different ways of forming a relationship with a moral code, each of which establishes a particular relationship between capacities of the self (will, reason, desire, action and so on) and a particular norm.” She explains that these ways of forming a moral subjectivity are manifest in everyday life, through bodily comportment, spiritual exercises, and daily routines. This book draws from her theoretical approach. The interviews with gay, lesbian, and transgender Muslim activists presented here show how everyday life constitutes the formation of ethical subjectivities that are beholden to social structures and moral codes while also challenging their norms.

This volume investigates agency and subjectivity formation through the concept of identity, which is both given and contested. However, it does not dwell on social theory, but rather focuses on lived experience. The modes of activism that it documents are specific practices and communal activities through which subjects come to understand themselves, exert themselves, express themselves, and fashion an effective subjectivity that fosters their flourishing in sexual relationships, family life, social connections, and political rights. Religious values, rituals, and ideals are intimately tied to all these fields, which are more commonly divided into private and public.
Interviews, Methods, and Limitations

Those interviewed for this book are all members of support groups for transgender, lesbian, and gay Muslims. There are, of course, many others who participate in these support groups who were not interviewed. As noted above, the reader should not assume that those interviewed are exclusively leaders or that the support groups documented are exhaustive. These groups are all located in constitutional democracies where Islam is a minority religion and Muslims act within a democratic political and legal framework. This specificity gives this study focus but it also creates limitations.

I interviewed activists from support groups with which I was familiar. These activists were volunteers who have shaped those groups. I employed a “qualitative method” of inquiry, a social science technique that emphasizes personal narratives for use in interpretative analysis (rather than a “quantitative interview” to gather specific information for use in statistical analysis). The interviews were open-ended and encouraged those interviewed to articulate their narrative of life and conflict resolution. I asked each activist about issues such as family history, youthful experiences of gender and sexuality, religious education and theological views, romantic relationships, and activist involvement. Those interviewed revealed their process of identity formation better when allowed to narrate their own stories freely, so I kept my questions spontaneous to spur each person to tell his or her own story in depth. The interviews left me with hours of recorded conversation that I transcribed and sent in textual form to those interviewed, asking for clarification and permission to use their words in this book. I asked whether I should change their names or those of persons mentioned in the interview; some requested names to be changed for personal safety or to protect family members from harassment. Some names in this book are thus not the actual names of those interviewed.

This book presents interviews with fifteen activists residing in South Africa, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, the United States, and Canada. These nations are home to the earliest established and the longest-running support groups. The interviewees are diverse: four are lesbian women, nine are gay men, and two are transgender persons (one transitioning female-to-male and one identifying as male-to-female).
Eight are South Asian, three are Arab, one is Berber, one is African American, and three identify as “mixed ethnicity” (known in South Africa as “Coloured”). Despite this diversity, all those interviewed share much in common. They are Muslims as defined by personal identity or spiritual faith. Many of them strive to practice the rituals of Islam in their daily lives to the extent and depth possible in their personal circumstances.

The activists interviewed are a minority of a minority but they are a very insightful few. They have struggled deeply with their consciences, against their religious tradition, and with their families. Since the early 2000s, their thoughts have become increasingly cohesive due to an international network of support groups. New technology allows these groups to organize, share experiences, and compile information. This network of support groups aims to build a community of gay, lesbian, and transgender Muslims and to represent their concerns to their larger Muslim community, their nation, and the wider world of concerned citizens. For this reason, their voices reveal more than their own stories; they reveal common patterns of identity formation, shared modes of activism, and intensifying connections between communities that are separated in space but united in intention.

The voices of these activists are the heart of this book, but it is written from my point of view as a participant-observer. I acknowledge that any person or group’s apprehension of the truth is always partial, yet no truth is apprehended without the risk of commitment. My commitment to this movement of Muslim gay, lesbian, and transgender support groups is this: their voices are valuable, their experiences are irreplaceable, and their struggles are admirable—whether one agrees with their opinions or not. Therefore, I chose to write this book in a way that lets them speak for themselves. I have asked questions, elicited responses, sought clarifications, and made comparisons. While this book analyzes these activists’ accounts and their theological insights, and contextualizes their political struggles, I have tried to keep my own beliefs as a Muslim aside in order to better appreciate the diversity of views offered. My own views are highlighted in other writings, especially in *Homosexuality in Islam*, which discusses in detail the Qur’an, hadith reports of the Prophet Muhammad’s teachings, and the shari’a developed by Muslim jurists in medieval times. In that book I reflect theologically upon the issues raised by lesbian, gay, and transgender Muslims. Readers who
are interested in theology can turn to that volume; this book highlights the lived experience which makes such theology necessary.

This book has limitations. It does not present interviews with activists who identify as “bisexual.” Its interviews are only with transgender, lesbian, and gay activists. They work with support groups for Muslims who belong to the wider community of different people who identify with some part of the LGBTQIQ continuum (the acronym stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, and Questioning). I hope this book will contribute to establishing a firm foundation for understanding that wider group with all its variations. I encourage researchers to focus on bisexual, intersex, and queer-identified Muslims to deepen the work that I offer here. The same tools and techniques of research that this study has employed can be applied to others to create a fuller picture of Muslims who belong to the minority group defined by sexual orientation and gender identity.

The fifteen activists interviewed volunteer with support groups for lesbian, gay, and transgender Muslims, groups which hold that religious belief and practice are important for their members. This fact sets this book apart from others, such as Illegal Citizens by Afdhere Jama, which offers snapshots of a wide diversity of “queer Muslim” lives globally, and Pepe Hendricks’s edited collection of stories of “queer” personal narratives from Cape Town entitled Hijab: Unveiling Queer Muslim Lives. These two books are admirable but they do not focus intensively on reconciling sexual orientation and gender identity with Islam, as this present book does. This book also differs from Brian Whitacker’s Unspeakable Love, which describes the lives of sexuality and gender minorities in the Middle East, including Jews and Christians as well as Muslims. By interviewing activists involved in support groups, this book tells a different story. The experiences of these activists showcase a sustained struggle to reconcile religious belonging with alienation because of sexual orientation and gender identity.

Identity Formation

The interviews presented here each capture something of the unique personality of the activist interviewed while also highlighting themes that many have in common. This interaction between person and
situation gives rise to identity formation, which is the groundwork for organizing support groups. Identity takes shape in the interaction between forces at four different levels: individual psyche, family relationships, community defined by religious tradition, and citizenship defined by national belonging. Distinguishing between these four levels can help us to understand identity formation, though in reality forces at all four levels interact as an organic whole in one person's life. The interviews demonstrate how these forces interact in the life trajectory of each person. Their interaction is particularly dramatic for those whose lives are characterized by social conflict rather than conformity, as are the lives of many gay, lesbian, and transgender Muslims. Conflict manifests at each different level: as internal conflict within one's own psyche, as disagreement over family expectations, as dissonance with the community's norms, and as argument over national citizenship that confers legal rights.

Even as this book illuminates wider patterns and repeated motifs, it rests on the foundation of interviews with individuals with distinctive situations, unique motivations, and singular life choices. These individuals have consciously resisted the pressure to conform. Their will to resist is rooted in their individual psyches before it can be expressed in family, community, or nation. All the interviews highlight how a person discovers her or his inner personality and conscience and each demonstrates how erotic awakening is an integral part of this process of discovery which is both exciting and dangerous, especially when sexual attraction leads in directions that family and community prohibit.

While the interviews foreground the crucial role of individual psyche in identity formation, the importance of family should not be overshadowed. The individual exists in relation to the family that nurtures her or him. Therefore, the second level at which identity formation takes shape is that of the family, as one comes to understand one's self in relation to parents, siblings, and relatives. As all children do, lesbian, gay, or transgender Muslims have very complex relations with their parents. Parents provide positive models for emulation and parents also serve as negative figures against whom to define one's own individuality. The interviews reveal a wide variety of ways in which gay, lesbian, and transgender Muslims relate to their parents. This finding should dispel the notion that homosexuality and transgender behavior are caused by a
particular configuration of parent-child relationship; examples of such suggestions are the myth of the overbearing mother, the stereotype of the father who really wanted a son, or the Freudian simplification that an absent father causes a homosexual son.

One pattern in these interviews that may surprise readers is the loving appreciation that transgender, lesbian, and gay children often feel toward their parents, despite the intense disagreements or coercion that they endure. This should caution us against seeing the formation of homosexual or transgender identity as a rejection of the family itself or as repudiation of one’s parents. To the contrary, the interviews reveal that many transgender, lesbian, and gay Muslims feel deep and abiding affection for their parents and a profound desire for their parents’ blessing, even if they are rejected, threatened, or ostracized by their families.

Other family members play crucial roles, and in several interviews grandparents were decisive figures in the identity formation of gay, lesbian, and transgender Muslims. This is only to be expected in cultures where extended families are valued and generational continuity is cherished. Often, grandparents substitute for parents who are absent due to practical contingencies or emotional distance. Sometimes grandparents represent figures of intense spirituality. Many of those interviewed for this book claim their grandparents—rather than their parents—as their role models for healthy spirituality.

Because Muslim families are often widespread and close-knit, aunts and uncles can also play important roles as substitutes for parents, providing relief for a child struggling against a parent’s personality. Some of those interviewed found support with aunts or uncles even if their parents rejected them. But the extended family can also cause difficulties, as a young family member has to deal with not just a mother and father but also a host of adult authorities who observe, criticize, and control what they see as norm-breaking behavior. In this way, Muslim families often extend seamlessly into the wider Muslim community. The family often acts to control its members to preserve family honor, reputation, and standing in the community (which is often valued more than an individual family member’s own identity or welfare).

The third level at which identity formation takes place is community, which refers primarily here to religious community. For most Muslims, individual belief and family affiliation compel them to understand
themselves as being part of an Islamic community. While in most cases this is not a membership that one chooses, one must choose how to practice it. The interviews reveal a great variety of experiences. Some gay, lesbian, and transgender Muslim activists were enthusiastic members of an Islamic community in childhood: praying in mosque, studying in madrasa (Islamic school or seminary), preparing for celebrations, and volunteering for charities shaped the identities of many of those interviewed. Many of them mourn the loss of participation in the Islamic community if they are ostracized for being lesbian, gay, or transgender. Ostracism can be more severe if they had held authoritative positions such as imam (prayer leader) of a group, as teacher in a madrasa, as counselor in a spiritual community, or as leader in a student organization. The risk of losing such valued connections to the wider Islamic community often restrains Muslims from coming out or engaging in public activism.

Whether or not they play a leadership role in the community, all gay, transgender, and lesbian Muslims struggle with Islamic discourse. The interviews show how transgender, lesbian, and gay Muslims have internalized Islamic discourse and therefore experience conflict over whether their sexual orientation and gender identity are against their religion. They question whether behavior based on these identities is immoral. They do not need family members or religious leaders to engage in debate, for this debate is already heated within their individual conscience. All the activists interviewed have engaged in debate through Islamic discourses both within themselves and also with others as members of a community. This debate persisted, often for many years, before they ever considered joining a support group or taking an activist stand.

Those interviewed struggle to forge an identity as Muslims while they live as citizens, for identity formation takes shape also within a fourth context, that of the nation. Every nation has a distinctive historical chronicle, legal framework, and set of civic values; through these elements one comes to understand oneself as a responsible citizen. Nations offer varying frameworks within which citizens exercise political rights and recognize civic obligations. This is especially true with regard to minority groups defined by gender identity and sexual orientation, because legal norms vary widely from nation to nation even
within the realm of secular democratic states. While gay, lesbian, and transgender Muslims are national citizens, they are also members of minorities defined by ethnicity and religion. Most of those interviewed are also visible members of a minority because they are immigrants or descended from immigrants deemed “of color” in nations that are largely of European ethnicity commonly denoted as “white.” Their difference in terms of sexual orientation or gender identity is less immediately visible, though it is no less important in defining their identity. Their struggle to form an identity depends crucially upon how the nation as a collective faces ethical challenges such as mitigating racial prejudice against ethnic minorities, negotiating the status of religious minorities, or fostering legal reform within a constitutional framework. The interviews presented here show that lesbian, transgender, and gay Muslims strive to maintain a delicate balance between solidarity with their religious minority group and their demand for full citizenship and legal protection in the nation. This balance is difficult to support, especially when their community is perceived to be under threat as an ethnic or religious minority. The third and fourth levels at which identity formation takes place—religious community and nation—intersect in novel ways for Muslims who are citizens of secular democratic states.

Clarifying Terms about Islam, Gender, and Sexuality

As Arabic and Islamic terms are mentioned, they are explained in the text or in the glossary at the end of the book. Yet some elements of Islam need to be clarified now. Gay, transgender, and lesbian Muslims participate in Islamic discourse whether or not they play leadership roles in Muslim communities. The term “Islamic discourse” refers to the foundational texts, shared symbols, legal decisions, and style of argumentation through which Muslims collectively enact their religious identity. This discourse motivates Muslims’ actions and mediates their conflicts. It orders the words, images, and thoughts through which Muslims generate their communal self-understanding.

Islamic discourse is defined by scholars, spokesmen, and jurists. Nevertheless it filters down into individual lives through community gatherings, family norms, and ritual practices—in some forms that are traditional and ritualistic and in others that are modern and technological.
Therefore, it deeply affects individual identity and group formation among Muslim subcultures. The interviews reveal how Islamic discourse impacts the activists’ lives. Most Islamic communities uphold patriarchal values and justify them by reference to religious texts. Therefore, anyone opposing patriarchal norms must confront these texts and dominant interpretations of them. One can confront these interpretations by direct refutation, by counterinterpretation, or by appealing to contradictory texts within the same Islamic discursive tradition (such as countering hadith texts with Qur'an or countering fiqh legal texts with Sufi teachings). Qur'an is the Islamic scripture, defined as God’s speech revealed to Muhammad in the Arabic language that was orally memorized by his followers and later compiled as a book after Muhammad’s death. Hadith are teachings of the Prophet Muhammad—through his words, deeds, or silent approval—that were observed, recalled to later generations, memorized, and eventually recorded in copious volumes as a guide to proper Muslim behavior. Fiqh texts are writings by Muslim jurists in the early medieval era who tried to codify proper conduct in all fields—from belief to ritual to commerce to family relations and sexual life. Sufi teachings are spiritual insights from the Islamic mystical tradition, whose advocates saw it as the “inner dimension” of Islam in contrast to the “outer dimension” of conduct regulated by jurists.

Lesbian, gay, and transgender Muslims argue through Islamic discourse against conventional Islamic interpretations, and do so with a variety of discursive agents. “Discursive agents” are people who exert power by invoking a discourse. Agents of Islamic discourse can be family or community; even lovers can be discursive agents, if one has a Muslim partner who refers to Islamic discourses to discuss or regulate one’s relationship. The most important discursive agents are religious functionaries: people who hold an official office or serve a public function related to Islam. Religious functionaries include a mosque’s imam, a madrasa instructor, a mufti (authoritative jurist) via the Internet, or a council of ulama (religious scholars).

This book explores how Muslims deal with diversity in sexual orientation and gender identity, so these terms need clarification. One must distinguish between sex, gender, sexuality, and sex acts. Sex refers to one’s anatomical genitalia, through which one is classified as male or female. Gender refers to one’s expression of social behavior organized
by norms classified as masculine or feminine. Sexuality refers to one’s consciousness of sexual desire and expression of intimacy and pleasure, which includes not just one’s “sexual orientation” (whether one desires sexual contact with a person of the opposite sex or someone of the same sex) but also more subtle issues like intensity and focus of sexual desire.

Sexual orientation is one crucial element of sexuality. Orientation refers to the class of person to whom one is attracted for sexual pleasure. A person attracted to those of the same gender is “homosexual” and one attracted to those of the other gender is “heterosexual.” One who is attracted to both genders is “bisexual” and one who feels no attraction is “asexual.” In many modern societies, English terms are gaining international currency to describe such people. Gay is used as a self-description for men who are exclusively homosexual in orientation, while lesbian is used for women who are exclusively homosexual. The terms gay and lesbian refer not just to a clinical psychological state (homosexuality) but also to a self-conscious identification with a subculture.

Sex, gender, and sexual orientation define important components of one’s personality but they say nothing about specific sex acts. One should never assume that a person characterized by homosexual orientation performs particular sex acts (or any sex act at all). A homosexual woman might never practice sex acts with a person of the same gender, but her sexual orientation would still be homosexual. Similarly, a man might practice sex acts with another man but not be homosexual: the sex acts might be caused by coercion or necessity rather than satisfaction of yearning for emotional fulfillment. Stereotyped associations of sex acts with certain kinds of people may not actually accord with the lived experience of those people.

When we analytically use these terms—sex, gender, and sexual orientation—we find that in society most people are “heteronormative.” They identify with their ascribed gender and fulfill their sexual desires in heterosexual relationships. But we also find that there are people who are not like this: they are unusual in terms of being statistically rare but they are routinely present in a given population. Diversity in gender identity and sexual orientation is a social fact. Some societies recognize them and give them valued roles, while other societies stigmatize them. Patriarchal societies in particular tend to treat gender and sexuality
minorities harshly, perceive them as threatening moral order, and try to suppress them.

Patriarchal societies assert that gender is determined by sexual anatomy, but in fact this is not true. A person who appears like a woman to observers—whether family, medical doctors, or people on the street—may identify as a man and feel like a man inside; further, this person may ardently desire to be seen by others as a man, to such an extent as to alter appearance, dress the part, or even elect for hormone therapy and sexual realignment surgery to become biologically male. There are such people whose sense of gender is ambiguous, who feel that they are neither “male” nor “female” but rather are both or neither. All such persons can be said to have “gender dysphoria” or a profound feeling of disharmony between their assigned gender (as imposed by others) and their own gender identity (as perceived by the self).  

Transgender is used as a self-description for those who do not identify with the gender that is socially ascribed to them, but rather feel that they are actually of another gender in terms of their inner psyche. Trans is a Greek term meaning “moving across.” Transgender indicates a person who “moves across” from the gender into which he or she was socialized to the gender with which he or she identifies. If transgender persons alter their physique, hormonal balance, or sex organs to match their inner psychic gender identity, they become “transsexual” persons. Transsexual means a person who “moves across” from the sex organs with which he or she was born to the sex organs with which he or she feels comfortable because such organs express his or her gender identity. One can be a transgender person without becoming a transsexual if one chooses not to alter one’s body to conform to one’s gender identity. In this sense, all transsexual persons were first transgender; they felt like a person of the other gender even before they acted to change their body to conform to that internal feeling and identity.

Both transgender and transsexual people are distinct from hermaphrodites, a term commonly applied to them. Hermaphrodite is a term applied to persons who naturally bear both male and female anatomical features (genitalia or secondary sex features that develop with puberty). However, this term is now seen as a derogatory popular term. In the scientific literature, such people are described as “intersex,” meaning that a person has anatomical features associated with
both sexes, female and male. Some intersex people undergo surgery in order to become either male or female since many societies offer no ambiguous middle ground. Some transgender people deliberately inhabit this ambiguous middle ground and they retain features commonly identified as both male and female; such people are commonly called “androgynous.”

Transgender, transsexual, and intersex describe the variable positions that people can take with regard to gender as an internal identity manifested in bodily appearance. These clinical terms help us to describe variable patterns of gender identity and mutability. These terms are relatively recent inventions of sociology, sexology, and clinical medicine. New terms have become necessary, especially as hormone therapy and sex-realignment surgery techniques have been invented and improved, allowing physical alteration of the body in ways not possible only a generation ago.

Sexual orientation is often confused with gender identity in Muslim communities. The families of Muslim gay men often understand them to be acting like or thinking like women; similarly they may understand lesbian women to be thinking or acting like men. Often issues of sexual orientation are treated by Muslim communities as problems of gender behavior, much to the detriment of lesbian or gay Muslims who understand themselves as women who love other women or men who love other men.

Though the terms for sexual orientation and gender identity are new, the patterns of behavior they describe have existed since long ago. Muslims may be familiar with indigenous terms from their own local cultures for people who do not conform to a binary division between male and female. Islamic history has witnessed at least three classifications of gender-ambiguous persons: the castrated man (khasi), the effeminate man (mukhannath), and the nonman (hijra). These categories are discussed in detail because they come up in interviews with Muslim activists. These premodern categories shape how Muslims perceive lesbian, gay, and transgender members of their community.

The eunuch is a person who was born with male sex organs and raised as a boy until castrated (usually when enslaved). Eunuchs did not become female: rather they inhabited an in-between position—they were legally and socially of neither gender. In contrast, the effeminate
male (*mukhannath*) is a person born with male sex organs and raised as a boy who displays effeminate behavior in speech, gesture, gait, or possibly dress. The term does not explicitly describe sex, sexual orientation, or sex acts. Rather it describes feminine behavior on the part of one who is known to be male; it describes transgender behavior or transvestite display rather than implying any homosexual orientation or practice of same-sex intercourse. However, in medieval times and later, the term came to be associated with men who accepted a passive role in anal intercourse (an association which is not essential to the category’s definition). A parallel category of *mutarrajulat* existed for women who behaved like men in speech, gesture, gait, or dress. These “emmasculine women” did not necessarily have a homosexual orientation or engage in same-sex acts.

Finally, a third indigenous category of the nonman or *hijra* exists in Islamic societies in South Asia (in Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh). The *hijra* is a person born with male sex organs and raised as a boy who, after the onset of puberty, feels that he is a woman. Cultivating inner identity with a woman, he abandons the category “man” and takes on female behavior, name, and dress, and voluntarily undergoes a ritual castration to remove both testicles and penis. Society conceived of the *hijra* as neither-man-nor-woman but rather as inhabiting an acknowledged third gender, that is “neither-nor” and therefore “in-between.” *Hijras* leave their families to live in highly structured communities with their own dialect of speech. South Asian observers mistakenly call them “eunuchs” because both *hijras* and eunuchs have undergone castration. However, the psychological motivation of a *hijra* (who voluntarily undergoes castration after maturity through a ritual and with initiation into a subculture) is completely different from that of a eunuch. The *hijra*’s status and social role is therefore distinct from that of eunuchs in premodern Islamic societies. Because the *hijra* feels like a woman in the body of a man, *hijras* come closest to transgender (male-to-female or MTF experience as described by modern terms. In premodern times without contemporary medical therapies or reconstructive surgery, the *hijra* could not physically alter the body to become a woman, though the *hijra* could remove the genital organs associated with men and take on features associated with women, like wearing women’s clothes and adopting female names.
There is some overlap between contemporary transgender people and categories already established in Islamic societies in the premodern period, but there is no easy equivalence to modern terms. The category transgender describes both men who feel that they are women and strive to become women and also women who feel that they are men and strive to become men. This category depends upon the new reality that medical techniques can actually engineer the transformation, such that the transgender person can become transsexual, often to the point that one is no longer recognizable as belonging to the former gender in which one was originally socialized.

Familiarity with these terms is crucial for listening to the voices of the activists interviewed for this book. I have not used “queer” to describe in one label all varied identities that question patriarchal heterosexuality. In the interests of making this book accessible, I persist in using the terms gay, transgender, and lesbian because these terms are more recognizable to general readers than the term “queer.” Queer is a recent label developed in activist and scholarly discourse to refer to all these varied kinds of people as one single group—those defined as “different” due to sexual orientation and gender identity—in an overtly politicized way to which not all members of those groups subscribe.

Some sociological writings use the term “nonheterosexual” as a clinical label to refer to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer persons. This inclusive list of different identities is often reduced to the acronym LGBTQ (and it sometimes extends as LGBTQIQ to include intersex and questioning persons). It is admirable to include all these people in one “umbrella” term but the acronym itself is cumbersome. In contrast, “nonheterosexual” has the merit of being a single-word term, but it has the limitation of being defined as a negation. There are no actual people who self-identify as “nonheterosexual.” To do so would suggest that they strive to be everything which heterosexuals are not, which is not an accurate description of transgender, lesbian, or gay people. This book tells of their struggle to assert their common humanity, religious affiliation, and spiritual aspiration while also affirming their difference. The term “nonheterosexual” does not accurately depict the trajectory of their struggle.

I have limited the use of terms and acronyms that might reduce this population's humanity or make them appear irreconcilably different
from their heterosexual family members and coreligionists. To further emphasize their humanity, I have employed recited verses and song lyrics to open each chapter, verses that were mentioned by those interviewed as inspirational. The aspirations of gay, lesbian, and transgender Muslim activists are grounded in the same human hopes that all share—security, health, self-sufficiency, love . . . and perhaps even salvation. With this background, we can turn to the voices of these activists and listen in earnest to their narratives that they strive to live out Islam.