

## ***Reflections: Editors Introduction***

Our Reflections section is intended as a forum for more exploratory or controversial material and in that spirit we decided to publish Dr Raheemson's article, *Islamic Marital Order & the Threats of Homosexuality in Nigeria*. Paul Johnson and Robert M. Vanderbeck wrote to us expressing their objections to the article and our decision to publish it. They agreed to write in detail of their concerns and objections, below, to which we have provided our reply. At the time of writing [Dr Raheemson's article](#) remains online.

### ***A response to 'Islamic Marital Order & the Threats of Homosexuality in Nigeria'***

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We write this piece to express, in the strongest possible terms, our objection to the recent publication of 'Islamic Marital Order & the Threats of Homosexuality in Nigeria' by M.O. Raheemson in the *Journal for Faith, Spirituality and Social Change* (Issue 1.1). In this article, Raheemson argues that Nigeria should develop 'a lasting solution to the threats of homosexuality, and lesbianism' (p. 106). The piece comes with a preface by the editors that suggests that, although they 'strongly disagree with [the author's] stance' (p. 96), Raheemson 'offers important insights for Islamic Studies' and provides 'a controversial article to provoke debate'. We fundamentally reject the suggestion that the publication of this article serves a useful or ethically defensible purpose, for reasons we outline below.

To start, we would argue that the article contains a number of propositions and arguments that, taken together, constitute an incitement to hatred on the grounds of sexual orientation. In England and Wales such material became criminalized by section 74 of the Criminal Justice and Immigration Act 2008, which amends the Public Order Act 1986. Part 3a of that Act makes it a criminal offence to use 'threatening, abusive or insulting words or behaviour' to 'stir up hatred' or, as a result of which, 'hatred is likely to be stirred

up'. An article that begins by describing homosexuality as a 'scourge' and which promotes views and actions for the purpose of 'checkmating' it (p. 96) falls, in our opinion, within this scope. These are not isolated phrases but examples of the rhetorical strategies used by the author to build a case for drastic measures to be taken against homosexuals. From the start, readers are informed that homosexuality is 'a dangerous threat' that cannot be permitted to go 'unchecked' (p. 96). Soon thereafter, it is claimed that those who practice homosexuality can be regarded as 'below animals' (p. 100) – a discursive tactic reminiscent of Nazi representations of Jews as rats or the Interhamwe's labelling of Tutsis as cockroaches. If this tactic weren't sufficiently transparent, two paragraphs later Raheemson cites religious instructions to 'kill' those who one finds 'doing the deed of the people of Lut' (p. 101), before reminding readers again that homosexuality is 'dehumanizing' (p. 102). We are then told that due to religious injunctions against 'unchastity', homosexuality is 'punishable by stoning to death' under *Sharia* law in northern Nigeria.

As is often the case in political discourses that identify enemies who must be eliminated, homosexuals are represented not merely as threats to themselves but also as dangers to others. Accordingly, Raheemson argues that homosexuality has 'destructive effects [...] in relation to the rights to life, human sanity/dignity and healthy living of individual (sic) [and] the safety and steady growth of mankind' (p. 102). He goes on to assert that, under *Sharia* law in northern Nigeria, there is approval for 'stoning to death as punishment for homosexual act (sic)' (p. 104), and that '[d]elay to act can be dangerous' (p. 104). Lest we not take seriously that homosexuals threaten other people's 'rights to life' we are recounted the story of a Muslim husband who 'secretly engaged in unnatural intercourse' outside of marriage and, subsequently becoming 'infected' (p. 104) with a disease that Raheemson never names, then passes this unidentifiable illness to his wife. This leads not only to both of their deaths but also the transmission of the deadly infection to those charged with 'washing the corpses' (one must question the ethical implications of not identifying this mystery pathogen, given that HIV – the virus that many readers will, no doubt, assume he alludes to – does not transmit this way). Raheemson reinforces his view that homosexuals are subhuman agents of death when he argues that those who would seek to legalize homosexuality are 'akin to the animals who feed on their young during famine' (p. 105). Finally, we are instructed that in order to produce 'an ideal Nigerian society' (p. 105) there must be a 'lasting solution' (p. 106) based on adherence to a particular religious ideology.

The resonances of this phrase with notions of social/religious purification, exemplified by the Nazi ambitions for a ‘final solution’, seem clear to us.

The law in England and Wales does not consider hate crime to be that which is merely ‘insulting’ or ‘abusive’, but ‘threatening’ (House of Commons Library, 2007), and we find it impossible to interpret this article otherwise. The law also requires that there must be an ‘intention, not merely a likelihood’ of inciting hatred (House of Commons Library, 2007), and this too seems obvious in Raheemson’s article. The author makes clear on a number of occasions that his article is a call for people to ‘intensify their efforts’ (p. 106) against homosexuality and twice invokes stoning to death as a legitimate response to homosexuals who, he has claimed, aren’t fully human. Raheemson doesn’t clearly specify whether he would like to see these practices adopted outside of Nigeria, but the article does repeatedly make universalizing claims about the nature of sexual morality and the obligations of religious adherents. In short, Raheemson’s article reeks of death from beginning to end.

Even if we set aside the issue of whether a piece such as this can be considered an incitement to hatred under the law, Raheemson’s piece clearly falls outside of all recognisable academic norms in the context from which the journal originates. Although many academics are justly concerned about preserving freedom of speech, the notion of protecting free speech does not ordinarily entail an obligation to provide a platform for arguments that repeatedly invite repression and violence in relation to a category of people. This is especially the case when that platform identifies itself as an academic journal, and thus has a reputation for expert credibility that other materials, such as self-published websites, do not. Whilst the ‘Reflections section’ of the journal in which Raheemson’s article appears states that it is open to ‘more exploratory material’ and pieces that ‘provoke debate’, this does not seem to justify the abandonment of many recognisable academic norms and scholarly standards.

To provide an example of the disregard of such standards, one need only look at the definition of homosexuality provided by the author:

Homosexuality is the feeling involving sexual attraction to persons of the same sex, or with a woman through her rectum or sex with a beast known as sexual perversion sex (p. 100, quoting Karim).

We have difficulty understanding how the editors of an academic journal find it reasonable to publish an article on homosexuality in which the definition of the central subject matter is given in this most grossly incorrect way. We are sure that the editors are aware that the accepted definition of homosexuality in contemporary academic discourse (at least in the contexts from which the journal originates) does not cover inter-species sexual activity, nor heterosexual rectal intercourse. The author does not discuss whether this definition is accepted within Nigerian academia but *does* make an assertion regarding its universal applicability. Although the author's definition is referenced (to a source dating from 1939), it seems difficult to conceive of how this could form the basis for a serious consideration or engagement with this subject.

The article is underwritten throughout by factually incorrect and/or unevidenced assertions regarding sexuality, human societies in general, and Nigerian society in particular. Statements about the family, the place of women in society, and heterosexual marriage are naïve in the extreme. We question whether serious debate can take place in relation to claims that are unevidenced, universalizing, and also sexist (given the obvious presumption of a male readership), such as: 'Marriage engenders love at first for wife, then for children, then for kith and kin, then for the society and ultimately, for the human race as a whole' (p. 94). The article as a whole is also premised on a confusing contradiction: whilst the author presents the 'anti-social' (p. 96) act of homosexuality as the nation's gravest threat, it is stated that homosexuality has no 'cultural foundation whatsoever' (p. 101) in Nigeria. In making this latter assertion, the author attempts to contribute to the eradication of homosexual practices in Nigeria through a denial of their existence. The claim that homosexuality is without any cultural basis in Nigeria is of course a common one (it has also been made, for example, by Archbishop Peter Akinola of the Church of Nigeria and others who insist that homosexuality is 'un-African'), but nevertheless completely sidesteps a number of complex, ongoing debates about the extent of same-sex practices, the presence (or absence) of gay and lesbian identifications, and the relationships between activist organisations in the global North and South (see, for example, Masaad 2002; Ward 2002; Scmitt 2003). Whilst it would have been informative to have Raheemson actually address these discussions, we are presented with a nonsensical dismissal of homosexuality as lacking any cultural foundation. An argument that makes homosexuality the nation's gravest threat, but which asserts that men and

women who engage in homosexual intimacies are somehow operating outside of ‘culture’ (as if such a thing were possible), is easily identifiable as a political strategy that attempts to utilize an abject ‘other’ (the ‘homosexual’) in order to legitimize, normalize, and essentialize a heterosexist and patriarchal ideology.

Raheemson completely ignores the limited yet nevertheless important ‘cultural’ engagements between religious faiths and homosexual people that currently take place in Nigeria. There are, of course, individuals and groups in Nigeria who work for the acceptance of homosexuals, including, for example, the Anglican group Changing Attitude Nigeria. The author claims the support of Christians as well as Muslims for his argument but fails to acknowledge the debates within worldwide Anglicanism on issues of homosexuality. Engaging with the impact of such debates upon all societies in which Christianity has a presence could have been one way of avoiding the polemical and solipsistic approach adopted. Although the article is billed in the preface as offering insights into Islamic scholarship, Raheemson also completely ignores Islamic scholarship that presents a different view to his own, such as re-readings of the story of Lut which, as Rouhani (2007: 173) notes, have ‘become a significant rallying point for queer Muslim discussion and scholarship.’ Therefore, although the article was published to inspire debate, it shows no interest in acknowledging or in any way engaging other voices; on the contrary, it seeks actively to erase them. Worse still, the author seems to favour a legal ban on forming organisations, publishing materials, or engaging in activism ‘that supports or in any way sanctions homosexuality’ (p. 102). Thus, in the name of ‘debate’, the *Journal for Faith, Spirituality and Social Change* has published an article by an author who supports the criminalization of anyone who would offer a counterview to his own.

We think that one of the worst aspects of this article is the work it does in reproducing the idea that there is a singular Muslim view on homosexuality, a point belied by the existence of, for example, Iraqi LGBT and the Al Fatiha Foundation (Rouhani 2007) which present very different perspectives than Raheemson’s. There are, of course, ongoing discussions in the social sciences and humanities about the problem of Northern dominance in academia, and how to include a wider range of perspectives and voices from the global South (for example, Desbiens and Ruddick 2006). We fear, however, that this piece – rather than providing new insights into other traditions of scholarship or anything else – is something at which many scholars and students in western institutions will simply gawk, feeling self-

satisfied about their own relative liberalism. The violently homophobic views that it expresses are not difficult to find elsewhere, nor hardly unknown, which means that the piece clearly does not contribute some new understanding of attitudes towards homosexuality. Nor has the publication of this article given space to a marginalised viewpoint or tradition from another context: rather, it has given a gloss of academic credibility to a well-known view that is hegemonic (although not uncontested, despite attempts to silence counterviews) in the context from which it was written. The very worst aspect of this publication is that it fails to directly address the fact that men and women in Nigeria (and, of course, elsewhere) are being subjected to the most draconian forms of social control, and suffer as a result. In an article that claims to make a serious engagement between faith and ethics, there is no mention of how this abuse of individuals can be justified - something which any serious scholar should have to address.

We are appalled by this article, by what it contains, but, most of all, by the decision to publish it.

## **References**

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