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Islam, Muslims and Politics of Queerness in Cape Town

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Abstract

For many queer Muslims, there is an intense struggle between sexual identity and religious affiliation, exacerbated by broader global discourses of Islamophobia in the 'Global North' and queerphobia within Muslim communities. Based on this intersectional location, we critically examine queerphobia debates in relation to the context of Muslims in South Africa. Our approach is informed by Jasbir K. Puar's (2007), critique of the prevailing "*Queer as Regulatory"* formation, where a liberated queerness is defined by resistance to religious norms, rather than a reformation or a broader set of engagements with these norms. In this regard, we examine modalities of being queer that reside outside of such regulatory frameworks, as reflected in the activities and work of *The Inner Circle* (TIC), a South African queer Muslim community. A core objective of the TIC is social and spiritual transformation that includes faith-based reflections on the lives of queer Muslims situated at the complex intersections of Islam, sexual orientation and gender identity. We examine TIC's approach of presenting progressive interpretations of the Qur'an as a primary source of religious identity, making a claim to the deepest spiritual and authoritative source of Islam, and the ways in which they challenge gender and sexual discrimination within the broader Muslim community.

Introduction

Within contemporary Muslim societies, particularly South Africa, there are a variety of positions with regards to sexual diversity, homosexuality, queerness,[3] and rights for the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender,

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[3] Within the literature, there are a variety of definitions for the term 'queer'. On the one hand, the term could indicate anything that is non-normative – economic system, political orientation or theological tendency. On the other hand, it could also indicate a broader umbrella category for gender and sexual minorities and an embracing term of the LGBTIQA (Lesbian, Gay, Transgender, Intersex, Queer and Asexual) communities. Within the context of this paper, we will be using the term to indicate the latter meaning. However, this paper will mainly focus on same-sex sexuality.

Intersex and Asexual (LGTBQIA) communities.[4] Despite the invariable complexity of this social phenomenon, for conceptual clarity one might situate the existing South Africa Muslim community's approach to sexual diversity on a spectrum. On the far right of this spectrum is an underlying virulent queerphobia which appears to intermittently erupt in parts of the community on occasion. This approach is exemplified in a statement by Mufti Bayat, a traditional religious leader and former spokesperson of the Jamiatul `Ulama', KwaZulu-Natal[5] during debates on the same-sex marriages bill in South Africa. He argued that same-sex unions constituted:

> a violation of the limits prescribed by the Almighty, a reversal of the natural order, a moral disorder and a crime against humanity. No person is born a homosexual, just like no person is born a thief, a liar or murderer.[6]

Thus, for Mufti Bayat, homosexuality is learnt and socially acquired – it is a destructive moral vice that can be rooted out and remedied. On the opposite side, at the far left of the Muslim spectrum, is a comprehensive acceptance and embrace of queerness and queer identities. The Inner Circle, a queer Muslim organisation based in Cape Town, embodies this

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[4] For a report that presents an overview of communal positions and contestations on sexual diversity in South Africa, see Moses Tofa's, The Narratives of Islam and Sexual Diversity: An Anatomy of Attitudes, Challenges, Opportunities and Trends in the South African Context (Research Report), Cape Town: The Inner Circle, (2014), See online at: http://theinnercircle.org.za/assets/tic-research-report-2014.pdf [Accessed 8 October 2017] For an autobiographical mapping of some of the debates, see Pepe Hendricks's edited volume, Hijab: Unveiling Queer Muslim Lives (Cape Town: The Inner Circle, 2009). Also see, Gabeba Baderoon, "'I Compose Myself': Lesbian Muslim Autobiographies and the Craft of Self-Writing in South Africa," Journal of the American Academy of Religion 83, no.4 (2015):897–915. For cogent insight into the theological and legal debates, see Scott Kugle's Homosexuality in Islam (London: Oneworld Publications, 2010). Finally, for a sociological mapping of queer Muslim subjectivities see Scott Kugle's book Living Out Islam: Voices of Gay, Lesbian and Transgender Muslims (New York: New York University Press, 2014).

[5] Among South African Muslim clerical bodies, the Jamiatul `Ulama' occupies a central position as an authoritative Sunni theological and legal organisation with offices in Gauteng and Kwa-Zulu Natal. It has strong alliances with other orthodox religious bodies in the country and is a member of the broader United `Ulama' Council of South Africa (UUCSA). The latter was founded in 1994, and served to bring together the different orthodox Muslim religious leaders and organisations in South Africa. In terms of the politics of UUCSA, Jamiatul `Ulama' and the Muslim Judicial Council (MJC) both occupy critical and powerful positions of authority in terms of their respective communities.

[6] Muhsin Hendricks, "A Way Forward through Ijtihad: A Muslim Perspective on Same-Sex Marriage," in *To Have and To Hold: The Making of Same-Sex Marriage in South Africa*, eds. Melanie Judge, Anthony Manio, and Shaun de Waal (Johannesburg: Jacana Media, 2009), 224.

inclusive Muslim queer ethic, which actively coheres diverse sexual expressions with Muslim faith, beliefs, practice and communal belonging.[7] At the centre of the spectrum are two main positions. Right of centre, are those whose approach reflect some iteration of a "don't ask, don't tell" position, with specific types of inflections. Implicitly accepting gay people, some stereotypical tropes nevertheless prevail in these discourses. These include: gay people are creative, good dress-makers, fabulous hairdressers, and great friends for their entertainment value. Left of the centre is simply a communal silence, sometimes with support for individual gay friends or family. Cognisant of this range of positions, this paper primarily focuses on the approach of those affiliated with The Inner Circle (TIC), a LGBTQI Muslim organisation, to examine queer Muslim subjectivities in a local South African context.

In this paper, we do four things. First, to situate the debates surrounding queer Muslims, we briefly present some elements in the contemporary politics of queerness and Islam, drawing on the astute theoretical interventions of queer theorist, Jasbir K. Puar (2007). In particular, we focus on her critique of dominant secular constructs of the queer liberal subject whose emancipation demands a rejection of religion. Second, we connect these debates to the location, work and politics of The Inner Circle (TIC) as a case study within Cape Town and the varying ways that it transgresses or complies with prevailing modes of queerness as theorised by Puar. Third, we critically discuss the religious and theological perspectives embraced by the TIC, including its ways of engaging central forms of scriptural, and moral authority with the practical, contextual and lived realities of their queer community. Fourth, we outline the broader context and the troubling of heteronormativity within the 'mainstream' Muslim community in the Cape, in light of controversies sparked by the launch of a new mosque (The Open Mosque) in 2014. The latter was confused with TIC and this initiated intense public debates on religion, sexual diversity and authority within the community.

[7] On 22 May 2017, The Inner Circle, publically announced in an email communication to members and allies, that it was reconstituting as a larger entity called "Al-Fitrah Foundation", due to issues of financial sustainability in the long-term. This new entity as a broader umbrella would include the ongoing work of the Inner Circle, in addition to a number of income-generating projects like a retreat centre, a health and wellness division, and a learning academy. However this transition is still in process, and the latter have not yet materialised. The organisation's public presence on social media still retains the name TIC. We will thus continue to refer to the organisation as The Inner Circle (TIC) given the timeline of our analysis.

The Politics of Queerness

A number of popular contemporary discourses suggest that queerphobia is characteristic of all Muslims societies, and Islam is depicted as a religion intrinsically hostile, antagonistic and oppressive to people who are involved in same-sex relationships. More broadly, this large-scale essentialism, as noted by Mahomed and Esack (2017), is premised on "a crude perspective that pitches a sexually liberal and tolerant west against a sexually oppressive and intolerant Islam."[8] Echoing an earlier Orientalist approach, this binary serves right-wing political agendas where racism and xenophobia are rationalised by the argument that Islam and Muslims are retrogressive and must be either rejected completely or contained, domesticated and ultimately assimilated by an enlightened west. Interestingly, while earlier Orientalist representations demonised the supposed sexual licentiousness of Muslim civilisation, including the representations of Muslim men as lecherous homosexuals, contemporary popular western discourses criticise Islam for precisely the opposite problem of sexual repression.[9]

Current polemics surrounding religion and sexual diversity are embedded in fraught geo-political networks that reinforce Islamophobia and fuel racist anti-immigration policies, all the while simplistically framing the secular west as the bastion of sexual freedom, human rights and democratic cultures. A number of critical social theorists have pointed out the contradictions inherent in such triumphalist perspectives, including blindness to the complex forms of structural violence[10] in the

[8] Nadeem Mahomed and Farid Esack, "The Normal and Abnormal: On the Politics of Being Muslim and Relating of Same-Sex Sexuality," *Journal for the American Academy of Religion,* 85, No.1 (2017): 232.

[9] For detailed discussions on the varying ways which colonial and orientalist representations shaped views on Islam and sexual diversity see Joseph Massad's *Desiring Arabs* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2007).

[10] A foundational article that informs our understanding of violence is Johan Galtung's "Violence, peace, and peace research," *Journal of Peace Research,* 6(3), 167–191. Galtung states, "Violence is here defined as the cause of the difference between the potential and the actual, between what could have been and what is. Violence is that which increases the distance between the potential and the actual, and that which impedes the decrease of this distance" (p.168). As such Galtung created a typology of different categories of violence (direct, structural and cultural). He understood structural violence to be built into a system or institution; allowing for the violence not to have an actor as we would easily witness with direct violence. The structural nature of this type of violence shows an "unequal power and consequently as unequal life chance" (p.171). Moreover, Galtung foregrounds the imperative of cultivating social relations based on the vision of 'positive peace,' which is understood as both the absence of direct physical and indirect structural violence. *For him* 'positive peace' can be understood as embodied through establishing an ethics of social justice, facilitated through "condition(s) of an egalitarian distribution of power and resource" (p.183). For a broader look at some of the literature,

forms of inequality, discrimination and injustice pervading many western contexts. More especially, such kinds of essentialist western perspectives render invisible the lives, views and realities of queer Muslims, and their complex relationships to Islam in different contexts. They also ignore those spaces where groups of Muslims might embody an Islam committed to sexual justice and inclusivity. Earlier Islamic feminist voices similarly contested imperial feminist narratives that centred the experiences of White western feminists as normative and universal, while framing Islam as singularly oppressive to women.[11] While indeed, a number of Muslim populations (and their non-Muslim contemporaries) are queerphobic, patriarchal and sexist; sorely lacking in such essentialising Islamophobic approaches are more nuanced and carefully located analyses of specific contexts, discourses and voices within both Muslim and secular contexts.

Resisting these simplistic binaries and their political imbrications, we draw on Jasbir K. Puar's (2007) work to explore varying modalities of queer identity outside of what she defines as the *Queer as Regulatory* formation.[12] In the latter, Puar notes that religion, faith or spirituality (most especially Islam) are all seen as incompatible with the liberal queer subject, emancipated as they are by secularism. Islam is depicted as a homogenous worldview, which is entirely oppressive to queer bodies. This results in an erasure of internal Muslim conversations around queerness which are, in any case, considered futile. The conventional queer subject must by definition universally transgress religious norms and is only conceived in a framework "outside of the norming constructions of religion, conflating agency and resistance."[13]

Critically interrogating this secular liberal construction that insists on irreligious queer subjectivities, reveals a specific historical trajectory emerging from experiences of the gay and lesbian liberation movement of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s primarily in the United States.[14] These

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see: *Kathleen Maas Weigert, "Structural Violence," in Encyclopedia of Violence, Peace, & Conflict, Vol 3, second edition, ed. Lester Kurtz (Oxford: Elsevier, 2008): 2004-2011.*

[11] Sa'diyya Shaikh, "Transforming Feminism: Islam Women and Gender Justice," in *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender, and Pluralism*, ed. Omid Safi (Oxford: Oneworld, 2003), 147-162.

[12] Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 11.

[13] Puar, "*Terrorist Assemblages,"* 13. There are also parallels between regulatory queer approaches and the positions of some secular feminists who argue that there is no redeeming value in religion for women; a kind of secular fundamentalism, unable to see the complexity, tensions and nuances within religion.

[14] Puar, "*Terrorist Assemblages,"* 14-15.

groups, within their own particular contexts found that the transgression of boundaries that created public/private dichotomies, and the rejection of norms around reproduction and the nuclear family were liberating. As such, the dominant homonormative formation of queerness also called for public displays of diverse sexual orientations and identities. In some of these contexts, public displays of affection and sexuality came to be regarded as 'good' and 'acceptable' behaviour that intrinsically demanded the transgression of conservative religious and cultural norms. The particular and specific western histories and resistances of the early LGBT movement continue to shape hegemonic public queer discourses. However, for many Muslims, queer and non-queer, these norms are contrary to their worldview, specifically notions of religious comportment that includes sexual modesty. As a result this presents a direct conflict between such Muslim perspectives and the prevailing homonormative queer formulations of subjectivity.

The hegemonic secular construction of queerness is a modality in which "freedom from norms" becomes a regulatory framework for the ideal queer, premised on a liberal idea of freedom. As such, liberal freedom becomes the "barometer of choice in the valuation, and ultimately, regulation of queerness."[15] In this limited and problematic definition of queerness, individual agency is framed and recognised only when it manifests as resistance to norms, rather than complicity with them, thus equating resistance and agency.[16] One critical intervention in this dilemma is to challenge the underlying view that queerness is somehow a universal formulation. Subject to a particular socio-historical context, the queer subject needs to be recognised as negotiating what it means to be queer in a specific time and space. As a result of this critique, neo-colonial, imperial, white, male-dominated and economically mobile articulations of queerness are recognised as such and are challenged. These complex intersections of power centre the experiences of an elite group and impose their ordering and manifestations of queerness on "non-normative" bodies in constrictive and exclusionary ways.

In response, Puar calls for multi-dimensional and intersectional perspective of power and hegemony which resist homonationalist enunciations of queerness. These, she argues, silence and suppress diverse formations of queer subjectivities, epistemologies and politics. Puar's discussion in the *Queer as Regulatory* as constituting a hegemonic discourse, reveals that a particular queer archetype is rendered universal and authoritative thus setting up a false binary

[15] Puar, "Terrorist Assemblages," 22.
[16] Puar, "Terrorist Assemblages," 23.

between being queer and being Muslim. Such a binary along with its ontology and epistemology is disrupted when Muslim queer subjects 'come out.'[17] This "other" queer subject challenges the hegemonic liberal secular queer formations and demands for queerness to be recognised as heterogeneous. Important to the recognition of heterogeneity is to localise, situate and analyse specific realties and perspectives offered by diverse groups of queer subjects. Puar suggests that such contextually-sensitive approaches facilitate more inclusive conceptions of queerness that reflect on complexity, contestation, resistance, co-option, negotiation, and the self-articulation of queer subjects in their own specific social and religious milieu. It is within this framework, that we approach the study of a contemporary group of queer Muslims at The Inner Circle in Cape Town.

The Inner Circle: Locations and Intersections

Within the South African context, one is faced with a paradox where, on the one hand, the country's constitution is internationally lauded as one of the most progressive political constitutions in the world - one that explicitly recognises queer and sexual rights. There are a number of activists and non-governmental organisations in the country who do crucial work regarding the rights, needs and challenges faced by queer people. On the other hand, there are significant levels of public discrimination and homophobia in communities throughout the country which have culminated in hate crimes. The more high-profiled of these crimes include the gruesome massacre of ten men in a gay massage parlour called Sizzlers in Seapoint, Cape Town in 2003.[18] In a number of South African townships, there has been a growing violent phenomenon of 'corrective rapes' where men have been raping lesbian women in order to, purportedly, 'cure' them of their deviant sexual orientation.[19] In 2013, the UN human rights chief, Navi Pillay, casting a comparative international eye on human rights abuses, stated that South Africa has "some of the worst cases of homophobic violence."[20] The retired Archbishop Desmond Tutu, veteran anti-apartheid activist, Nobel peace laureate, and the sustained voice of moral courage in South Africa,

[17] Puar, "Terrorist Assemblages," 11.

[18] Rebecca Davis, "Straight people, why do you hate us so much?" Available online at: https://mg.co.za/article/2016-06-17-00-why-do-you-hate-us-so-much [Accessed 15 November 2017]

[19] Annie Kelly, 2009. "Raped and Killed for being lesbian: South Africa ignores 'corrective attacks'." See online at: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/mar/12/eudy-simelane-corrective-rape-south-africa [Accessed 15 November 2017]

[20] Rebecca Davis, 2013. "Why Tutu's Support for Gay Rights Matters." See online at: https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2013-07-29-analysis-why-tutus-support-for-gay-rights-matters/#.Wf64fxOCw6g [Accessed 12 November 2017]

equated the struggle against homophobia to the struggle against racism.[21]

Within this broader contested socio-political terrain, a group of queer Muslims in the Western Cape founded an organisation called The Inner Circle (TIC). TIC is a human rights-based organisation based in Cape Town, and was originally established in 1998 as the Al-Fitra Foundation before it was registered as The Inner Circle in 2006.[22] The organisation was initiated by Imam Muhsin Hendricks, South Africa's first and only openly gay imam. Hendricks grew up in an orthodox Muslim family in Cape Town, the grandson of an imam, and later trained to become an imam in a traditional Sunni madrassa system in Pakistan. Upon his return to South Africa, and after ending a difficult marriage (within which he fathered three children), Imam Muhsin 'came out' publically. He eventually became an activist and founded Al-Fitra Foundation (which was subsequently renamed The Inner Circle) to provide support and community to people struggling to reconcile their faith and sexual identity.[23]

On the one hand, *TIC* draws on the rights-based framework of the secular South African constitution to provide it with legitimacy and state protection from antagonistic elements within the Muslim community. On the other hand, Imam Hendricks and the other founders, grounded the vision of the organisation within a particular vision of Islam as reflected in the initial name of the organisation (*Al-Fitra*). Invoking this Qur'anic term, *fitra*, which generically refers to a human being's essential nature or given disposition, TIC proposes that that sexual orientation is inherent and God-given, determined by nature rather than nurture.[24] As such the TIC sees its own mandate as the creation of a Muslim community that embraces all forms of gender and sexual diversity as an expression of God's creation. At the core of TIC's mission and vision is the "spiritual transformation in the broader Muslim community" in an attempt to add a faith-based reflection to the lives of queer Muslims situated at the

[21] Times Live, "South Africa Should Reject Homophobia, says Tutu," July, 26, 2013. See online at: https://www.timeslive.co.za/news/south-africa/2013-07-26-south-africa-should-reject-homophobia-says-tutu/ [Accessed 15 November, 2017]

[22] Moses Tofa. 2014. The Narratives of Islam and Sexual Diversity: An Anatomy of Attitudes, Challenges, Opportunities and Trends in the South African Context (Research Report), Cape Town: The Inner Circle, (2014), ii. See online at: http://theinnercircle.org.za/assets/tic-research-report-2014.pdf [Accessed 8 October 2017]

[23] Sertan Sanderson. 2014. "I am an imam but I'm also gay. And I am prepared to die for this." See online at: https://www.thesouthafrican.com/i-am-an-imam-but-that-im-also-gay-and-im-prepared-to-die-for-this/ [Accessed 10 November 2017]

[24] Scott Siraj al-Haqq Kugle. "Engaging Religious Tradition." In Living Out Islam: Voices of Gay, Lesbian and Transgender Muslims (New York: New York University Press, 2014): 25.

"intersection between Islam, sexual orientation and gender identity."[25] TIC further explicitly outlines its objectives as encouraging the mainstream and oppositional parts of the Muslim community to make a "paradigmatic shift from the orthodox belief that only heterosexuality is permissible in Islam, to an Islam which embraces sexual orientation and gender identity and counters the endemic patriarchy in orthodox Islam."[26] To achieve this goal, TIC prioritises its engagement with the Qur'an in significant ways, and foregrounds a Qur'anic hermeneutics of human dignity, liberation and justice – one that embraces sexual diversity.[27] Their educational fora includes studying liberationist readings of the authoritative Islamic source texts like the Qur'an and hadith, contemporary scholarship on sexuality and gender, as well as detailed reflections on the lives and experiences of queer Muslims in many contexts, globally and locally.

TIC organises a number of programmes, which fall into the categories of "public education, capacity building, networking, tools for transformation, advocacy, movement building, and the provision of psycho-social services."[28] Furthermore, TIC also has an egalitarian mosque space where heterosexual women and queer Muslims are encouraged to lead the prayers *(salah),* deliver the sermon, and sit where they feel comfortable. There is neither gender-segregation nor gendered restrictions in this mosque, unlike most mosques the world over. Finally, TIC is committed to trans-national Muslim solidarity and is a member of the international *Global Queer Muslim network.*[29] TIC has strengthened its broad international allyship by setting up robust organisational relations across national boundaries that allows for a range of possibilities in terms of exchange of skills, capital and resources.[30]

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[25] Tofa, "The Narratives of Islam and Sexual Diversity," ii. This report conducted by TIC, and available on its website includes a map of TICs vision, mission and objectives.
[26] Tofa, "The Narratives of Islam and Sexual Diversity," ii.
[27] Tofa, "The Narratives of Islam and Sexual Diversity," ii.
[28] Tofa, "The Narratives of Islam and Sexual Diversity," ii.
[29] Tofa, "The Narratives of Islam and Sexual Diversity," ii.

[30] The Inner Circle, has an Annual International Retreat (AIR) which regularly draws significant numbers of international participants, queer Muslim activists and academic/activist allies. Through this forum, TIC has established strong transnational connections and solidarity with queer groups across the globe. The 2017 AIR which was held in Stellenbosch, was based on the theme of "movement building," in which TIC was foregrounded the importance of establishing a global queer Muslim movement. For more information on the 2017 retreat see http://www.mambaonline.com/2016/10/14/queer-muslims-gather-cape-town-international-conference/ [8 October 2017] For a more general understanding of AIR see here: http://theinnercircle.org.za/air.html [Accessed 8 October 2017]

In terms of its relationship to local queer organisations, TIC is situated in more complex ways within an intricate set of socio-economic dynamics framing local queer politics. Cape Town is known as the "Pink Capital of Africa" and is lauded for its liberal and progressive culture, which in specific high-profiled locations, is tolerant and even accepting of gay bodies. LGBT traveling guide, *LGBT Weekly* has mapped out 'hotspots' for queer people to travel to in Cape Town. Their list of tips includes a number of top five-star restaurants, tourist sites and clubs within the 'pink quarter' where there are many gay-owned businesses and boutique stores.[31] While this welcoming space for gay bodies exists within Cape Town, it is nonetheless a space that replicates racial, class and gender hierarchies of the broader neo-liberal city.[32] In this regard, the 'pink quarter' is a gay male dominated space, which relegates women, trans and gender non-conforming bodies, and Black people to the margins of the space.[33] Exacerbated by the racialised capitalism defining broader Cape Town, many Black, and most poor or working class bodies are located on the periphery of the city and have to travel long distances to enter the boundaries of the city centre, where the 'pink quarter' is located. While working class and Black people are certainly allowed into the space, it is not a space that was created for them or one that is inviting to them. It was created for white middle class gay men, who

[31] Adrienne Jordan, 2014. "Welcome to Cape Town: the gay capital of Africa." Available online at: http://lgbtweekly.com/2014/01/16/welcome-to-cape-town-the-gay-capital-of-africa/ [Accessed 12 November 2017]

[32] For valuable insights on queerness within Cape Town see Andrew Tucker, Queer Visibilities: Space, Identity and Interaction in Cape Town (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).

[33] Our understanding of racial politics in South Africa is informed by the contemporary political moment and the longer legacy of anti-racist activism. Within the context of this paper, our definition of the socially constructed term of 'Black' has been informed by a reading of Steve Biko's work on Black Consciousness. Drawing from the Black Consciousness Movement, Biko uses the term "Black" to refer to a more encompassing political identity, which includes those who were identified as Black, Coloured and Indian by the Apartheid regime, that is, all those who are or have been "by law or tradition politically, economically and socially discriminated against as a group in the South African society" and who struggle collectively against such forms of oppression (Biko, 1978, 48). We choose this definition since it reflects that being black is not an issue of pigmentation but rather about solidarity between historically oppressed groups in South Africa, the vast majority of whom continue to face socio-economic challenges in terms of an enduring racialised political economy. We are aware that our use of "Black" in an inclusive sense is not shared by all South Africans. Some South Africans from historically oppressed groups identify varyingly as "Indians" or "Coloured" as per apartheid designations, and there are certainly varying types of internal power dynamics of association/disassociation, inclusion/exclusion between and within the different historically oppressed groups that endure and are determined by specific local contexts.

define spaces of consumption and entertainment within the most visible and economically privileged queer spaces in Cape Town.[34]

An example of the related race and class tensions in the city is the annual Cape Town Pride March. The March which began in 1993 is dominated by this elite group of gay men. Accusations of exclusivity reflected in the planning and events of the Cape Town Pride March came to a head in 2015. A group of queer activists accused the organisers of the Pride March of being racist, and organised an array of alternative events which coincided with the "mainstream" Pride celebrations to offer more inclusive welcoming queer spaces.[35] The alternative Pride celebrations were critical of the ways in which articulations of queerness by "mainstream" Pride was so heavily dominated by the experiences of middle class, gay, white cis-men, and thus deeply alienating of queer people who did not share this culture.[36] Debates in the media highlighted an explicit criticism of the overwhelming hegemony of "whiteness" and the "consumer-corporate-capital-fuelled" nature of the Pride experience, as well as the way in which Pride events were blind to issues of disability and access in their events, and did not address critical prevailing issues of violence against queer bodies in poor and working class areas.[37] Thus there are and have been significant political contestations in Cape Town within the queer community which echo broader global debates calling for attentiveness to intersectional dynamics of power and hegemony in queer movements.

TIC occupies an ambivalent position in this contested local landscape of queer politics. On the one hand, it resists the regulatory framework of queerness as articulated by Puar; on the other hand, it is simultaneously complicit with such a regulatory neo-liberal formation. For example, TIC participates in the annual Cape Town LGTBQIA Pride March, with no evidence of critiquing or contesting the exclusivist nature of this

[34] For example, the price of the entrance fee to a club or the cost of food in restaurants in the 'pink quarter' is unaffordable for people who are not economically mobile.

[35] Luiz Debarrons. 2015. "Cape Town Pride race row grows as Alternative Pride launched." See online at: http://www.mambaonline.com/2015/02/20/cape-town-pride-race-debate-grows-alternative-pride-launched/[Accessed 12 November 2017]

[36] The frustration with racism, privilege and exclusion was captured by one of the signs at the "Alternative Pride" celebrations, which stated: "Kwanele! Enough with the privileged, white, gay, male images presented to us by Cape Town Pride in its current form. Kwanele with single-struggle politics and lack of intersectional understanding of oppressions." As quoted in Maregele, 2015. See online at: https://www.groundup.org.za/article/gay-and-lesbian-activists-call-racist-cape-town-pride-be-more-inclusive_2725/ [Accessed 12 November 2017]

[37] Nyx McLean, 2015. "Whiteness on the march: An open letter to Cape Town Pride." See online at: https://mg.co.za/article/2015-02-12-whiteness-on-the-march-an-open-letter-to-cape-town-pride [Accessed 15 November 2017]

celebration, in spite of the severe criticism raised by queer activists in 2015 and since then. Acknowledging some of the complexities of navigating the broader queer community of Cape Town, Imam Muhsin notes: "I'm not a flamboyant queen running around in my underwear in bright colours. I have a mobile mosque on wheels during Cape Town's Gay Pride, but that's as far as I ever really venture into the gay scene."[38] Such a "venturing" into the "gay scene" is accompanied by a larger apolitical queer ethic by TIC, which does not question the fundamental modalities of queerness reflected in the Pride March and its relationship to forms of domesticity, racism, nationalism and the market. Here, there is no public position or statement by TIC that asks critical questions of the Pride March and its adoption by the City of Cape Town, and what that means for the City's posturing within the global financial market and its self-marketing as a place of investment.

On the one hand a mobile mosque is a novel idea that disrupts the hegemonic cultures of whiteness and secularism, generally dominating the Pride space. On the other hand, a "mosque on wheels" becomes a superficial marker of diversity when by virtue of TIC*'s* silence on deeper ideological contentions around Cape Town Pride, it implicitly cooperates in the broader context of exclusionary elitist politics. It might reflect a form of domestication of TIC who appear uncritical of the broader politics of the Pride March which overwhelmingly functions in more regulatory modes. In terms of the alienation of Black people, working class communities, women and trans people from the Pride March, TIC*'s* silence is even more problematic since the majority of its members are people of colour from working class backgrounds. TIC*'s* location in this arena does not then contest the problematics of the whitewashing of queerness in Cape Town. Despite its claim to the broader Islamic liberation theology (which has its roots in the anti-apartheid movement) paradigm, TIC membership has remained largely "Indian" and "Coloured."[39] There appears to be a blindspot around more critical

[38] Sertan Sanderson. 2014. "I am an imam but I'm also gay. And I am prepared to die for this." See online at: https://www.thesouthafrican.com/i-am-an-imam-but-that-im-also-gay-and-im-prepared-to-die-for-this/ [Accessed 10 November 2017]

[39] Following on from our previous footnote about race, our use of the racial categories of "Coloured" and "Indian" are based on people's self-understanding. Indian has been used within the historical context of people's socio-cultural and ethnic origins among slaves or indentured labourers coming from the Indian sub-continent. Coloured has been used as a broader term for people of Indonesian slave or indigenous decent. For a more nuanced understanding, see Zimitri Erasmus' (2001) edited volume, *Coloured by History, Shaped by Place: New Perspectives on Coloured Identity in Cape Town.* While this racial classification is based on the apartheid system, we use it here as way of understanding people who still identity with these categories.

engagement, circumspectly and intersectionally, with issues of power and politics – particularly at the juncture of race, sexuality and class, as these are come together within the context of the Cape Town Pride March.[40] In terms of the latter TIC performs its religiousity in rather unreflective ways that serve to reinforce race and class hegemonies.

Engaging the Qur'an, Engaging the Muslim Community

When engaging with Islam for practitioners and in relationship to intra-Muslim conversations, TIC appears to have a far more reflective and deep engagement with the nature of religiosity. In expressing its religious worldview and identity, *The Inner Circle* draws centrally on the Qur'an as a primary source of guidance, authority and legitimation.TIC foregrounds progressive interpretations of the Qur'an by two contemporary Muslim scholars, Farid Esack, a South African Muslim scholar and activist, and Scott Siraj Al-Haq Kugle, a North-American Muslim queer scholar and activist. Members of the TIC embrace Esack's hermeneutical approach as articulated in *Qur'an, Liberation and Pluralism* (1997) – a book that is considered required reading for many of the TIC programmes.[41] The text addresses interreligious solidarity against forms of oppression focusing on how Muslims have varyingly engaged with the Qur'an in relation to the South African anti-apartheid struggle. While this work makes no explicit reference to sexual diversity, Esack presents a framework for a Muslim liberation theology that is focused on resisting oppression and on bringing the lives and experiences of those who are socially marginalised to the centre of his engagement with the Qur'an. This text is used as a collective resource to nourish Queer Muslims at TIC, as they draw consciously on their own lives and experiences to engage the Qur'an. In another influential work, Esack notes the central significance of the Qur'an to Muslims in a comparative manner by stating that the Qur'an is to Muslims, what Christ is to Christians – the divine made 'flesh,' material and accessible.[42] Esack further argues that the Qur'an is alive and constantly changing, depending on the reader and his/her sensibilities. As a result of this, he states that the Qur'an has "a quasi-human personality" that is embodied and performed in a number of different ways, contingent on its audience and interpreters. [43] Moreover, a focus

[40] For an interesting analysis on the cotemporary political moment and its relationship to queer politics, see Nadia Davids and Zethu Matebeni, "Queer politics and intersectionality in South Africa," *Safundi,* 18, No. 2 (2017): 161-167.

[41] Scott Siraj al-Haqq Kugle, *Homosexuality in Islam: Critical Reflection on Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Muslims*. London: Oneworld Publications, (2010), 38.

[42] Farid Esack, "The Qur'an in the Lives of Muslims." In *The Qur'an: A User's Guide* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2005): 13-29.

[43] Esack, "The Qur'an in the Lives of Muslims," 17.

on the Qur'an as an authoritative sacred text within the Muslim tradition is something that is shared between Queer Muslims and other segments within the "mainstream" Muslim community.[44]

Kugle's pioneering work "Homosexuality in Islam," is also considered core reading for TIC members, and he is frequently invited to speak at TIC annual retreats. His work, with its strong historical, theological and textual focus, proposes liberationist and sexually-sensitive readings of central Islamic texts and traditions. Like Esack, he foregrounds that the Qur'an is open to a variety of interpretations. These interpretations are contested, grappled with, and informed by believers' lived experiences and realities. While pointing to the fact that Muslims have produced a rich scholarly canon of interpretation *(tafsir)* of the Qur'an, he directs attention to the fact that the tradition of authoritative *tafsir* literature factually reflects contestation and pluralism.[45] Kugle invokes a history of multiple readings of the Qur'an by invoking the reported words of an authoritative early Muslim leader, Imam Ali, who is reported to have said "the Qur'an is written in straight lines between two covers. It does not speak by itself. It needs proper interpreters, and the interpreters are human beings."[46] Kugle, as a queer Muslim activist and scholar, draws on this tradition invoking a foremost and powerful figure in Muslim history, to highlight the earliest Muslim recognition that human beings 'speak' for the Qur'an, that human subjectivities and interpretive lenses are central to the production of meaning, value and ethics from the sacred text, and from the tradition more broadly. Kugle's approach does not shy away from textual ambivalence or moments of tension, but argues that such moments require critical engagement for queer Muslims in order to produce "sexually sensitive" readings of the text.[47] In addition, Kugle has also published a sociological study on the lives and experiences of contemporary queer Muslims, and their negotiations of Islam and sexuality, in five different contexts internationally. One of his empirical sites for this study was Cape Town, South Africa where he interviewed members of TIC.

In an interview with Kugle, Imam Muhsin Hendicks, as the leader and religious guide at the TIC, observes that it is through discussions of the Qur'an that queer Muslims are able to develop an Islamic spirituality that

[44] Kugle, "Engaging Religious Tradition," 30.
[45] Kugle, "Homosexuality in Islam," 39.
[46] Kugle, "Homosexuality in Islam," 39.
[47] Kugle, "Homosexuality in Islam," 39.

resonates with their queer identity.[48] Like Kugle, Imam Muhsin maintains that the Qur'an does not deal explicitly with homosexuality or homoerotic relationships. Both these thinkers argue that the Qur'anic narratives of Prophet Lot and the peoples of Sodom and Gomorrah – narratives commonly understood to condemn homosexuality – are in fact *not* addressing same-sex relationships per se but a particularly injurious and criminal form of behaviour, namely male-to-male rape and assault.[49] They argue that the contemporary idea of and possibilities for egalitarian and publically recognised same-sex relations were simply not part of an earlier historical imaginary and therefore were *not* the subject of the Qur'anic critique of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. Imam Muhsin suggests that because loving homosexual relationships based on mutuality are not explicitly mentioned in the Qur'anic text or the legacy of the Prophet Muhammad *(Sunnah)*, "principles must be drawn from the Qur'an to guide one's behaviour in homosexual relationships, just as principles are drawn out to apply to any host of new situations that Muslims now confront."[50] Here one finds evidence of Imam Muhsin's embrace of traditional Muslim legal methodology and tradition, which call for *ijtihad* or creative applications and innovative solutions drawing on core Islamic principles, for cases not explicitly addressed in authoritative source texts.

TIC members in light of belonging to a sexual minority, re-read and reinterpret the Qur'anic text as a collective, in ways that resist oppression and that forge ways to enhance their religious and spiritual lives. Like the example of Imam 'Ali, they explicitly acknowledge their socio-political positionality informing their readings of the Qur'an. Kugle in his sociological study, argues that Muslims at TIC "approach the Qur'an with a dual strategy of resistance and renewal."[51] While resisting previous homophobic and heterosexist interpretations, they advocate for new Qur'anic interpretations that affirm their existence as part of the diversity of God's creation. Kugle adds that these queer Muslims, by embracing *tafsir* as a discourse contingent on changing socio-historical conditions, welcome the dynamic and tentative nature of Qur'anic interpretations, which allows for a multiplicity of voice to emerge. TIC's engagement with sexually sensitive and multivalent readings of Muslim tradition has met with resistance in significant parts of the broader Muslim community in the Cape.

[48] Kugle, "Engaging Religious Tradition," 30.
[49] Kugle, "Engaging Religious Tradition," 31.
[50] Kugle, "Engaging Religious Tradition," 31.
[51] Kugle, "Homosexuality in Islam," 40.

Engagements with the Mainstream Community: The Case of the Open Mosque

The Inner Circle has been in existence at the periphery of the Muslim community, and despite some intermittent challenges to Imam Muhsin's religious authority, the mainstream Muslim community appears to have left them alone to go about their work. Such an approach towards queer Muslims essentially mimics a broader structural approach towards sexual diversity based on a "don't ask, don't tell" position. However, this societal attitude is disturbed every time there is public debate on specific issues involving Islam and sexual diversity, such as when queer Muslims made a public claim towards marriage equality during debates on the passing of Same-Sex Marriage Bill in South Africa in 2006; or debates that emerged after a closeted[52] Muslim man, Omar Mateen, killed 49 people at a gay nightclub in Orlando, Florida in 2016[53]; or the founding of The Open Mosque in 2014 which was initially misunderstood as the founding of a "gay mosque." This final section of the paper focuses on the last-mentioned Open Mosque saga of 2014 as a local case study to analyse one instance of the eruption of queerphobia within the Muslim community.

[52] We use the term 'closet' not as a prescriptive term. Rather, it denotes the dissonance between his sexual orientation and parts of his communal or public identity.

[53] Even though the Orlando Shooting occurred in the US, queer Muslims throughout the world responded to the shooting. Given that the killer Omar Mateen was a closeted Muslim gay man, for many in Cape Town, it exacerbated an already tense internal struggle between two parts of their identities: being a Muslim and being a queer person. A number of local queer Muslims and social justice activists in South Africa, offered their support and condolences, including: a student organization, the UCT Muslim Youth Movement based at the University of Cape Town; see: https://www.facebook.com/UCTMYM/posts/1742711982634851 [Accessed 9 November 2017]. Another progressive Muslim congregation in Cape Town, The Claremont Main Road Mosque (CMRM), committed to broader issues of social justice condemning the shooting and called out the homophobic nature of the event: http://cmrm.co.za/cmrm-condemns-orlando-killings-as-homophobic/. [Accessed 9 November 2017]. The CMRM has had an uneven history of dealing with issues of sexual diversity, including having put pressure on Imam Muhsin in the late 1990's to leave his teaching post at their Saturday madrassa classes when he first came out. It is thus noteworthy that the Imam of the mosque, Dr Rashied Omar, in his 2016 `*Id Khutbah* reflectively and unequivocally admitted that the dismissal of Imam Muhsin was an injustice perpetrated by the CMRM in the past, and that it was time to recognize and combat homophobia within the Muslim community. see here: http://cmrm.co.za/id-al-fitr-khutbah-towards-intersectional-social-justice-confronting-homophobia-in-our-communities-by-imam-dr-a-rashied-omar/ [Accessed 9 November 2017].

The open mosque was founded by South African born, UK-based academic, Dr Taj Hargey.[54] The initial public controversy around the Open Mosque was based on a confusion that this was a gay mosque partially because it was located on the same road as the TIC offices.[55] In the media there were vociferous debates on homosexuality and Islam, including some vitriolic queerphobic sentiments expressed on Muslim community radio. In September 2014, during a radio interview conducted on the Voice of the Cape (VOC) the then deputy president Muslim Judicial Council (MJC), Shaykh Riad Fataar stated that he was not willing to call the Open Mosque a "mosque". Instead it should be called a "temple" or "a place of worship" (Fataar 2014). Given the MJC's role as a leading religious authority in the Cape, this comment explicitly served to delegitimise what was perceived as a religious space welcoming of queer Muslims. Designating a gay mosque as a "temple" or as simply a more neutral non-aligned "place of worship" – and refusing to acknowledge its status as a "masjid" or "mosque" is to effectively place it outside the Muslim community. Intriguingly, this statement raises a broader question of whether the powerful position of the MJC does in fact accord the organisation the authority to decide which congregational spaces may or may not be recognised as a mosque or *masjid.* Fataar's statement reflected a power-play intended to establish a hierarchy of sacred spaces, where the normative correct, proper and legitimately Muslim space, is the heteronormative *masjid* crowning the hierarchy – and that the MJC has the power to authorise related claims.

The Open Mosque saga revealed the naturalised relationship of heteronormativity to centres of power in the Muslim community. In other words, the sacred quality of the mosque space for these religious leaders was contingent on heterosexual Muslim believers performing

[54] Hargey was seen by the TIC to be a progressive straight Muslim academic and ally who was invited to be a speaker at the TIC annual retreat in the very week that he founded the Open Mosque. However, he did not inform TIC members that he was planning to open a mosque in the same street as the TIC offices, and Imam Muhsin found out about the new mosque through social media. For this and a view of Hargey's problematic political stances, including his ambivalence on issues of sexual diversity in Islam, see Shaikh and Manjra, 2014 "Hargey, patriarchal, patronizing," see online at: https://www.iol.co.za/capetimes/opinion/hargey-patriarchal-patronising-1759332. [Accessed 8 October 2017]. Later as the controversy about the Open Mosque unfolded, Hargey stated explicitly in an interview "I do not endorse homosexual living, but I do not condemn them as people." See online at: https://www.iol.co.za/news/south-africa/western-cape/open-mosque-to-launch-in-cape-town-1750826 [Accessed 8 October 2017].

[55] While Initial debates on the Open Mosque in the South African media concerned issues of sexual diversity and Islam, it later it became connected to issues of sectarianism due to Hargey's purported theological affiliation with the Qadiani sect that many traditional Sunni Muslim leaders in the Cape view as heretical.

their religiosity and sexuality within the boundaries as determined by orthodox perspectives.[56] As such:

> [T]he mosque space constitutes a temporal sacred center, not because of particular sacralised qualities or inherent axial signification […] but because Muslim congregants gather here to participate in religious meaning-making through the performance of supplicatory prayers and expressions of pious belonging and commitment [to Islamic orthopraxis].57

In this light, the perception that the Open Mosque was a gay mosque constituted a violation of meaningful boundaries for Islamic orthodoxy. For the latter, the religious and pious expressions of queer Muslims do not constitute a legitimate Muslim subjectivity with recognised access to full, authentic and Islamically credible sacred space.

In another interview, Fataar, sought to reaffirm sexual orthopraxis by reinstating the limits of supposedly correct Islamic behaviour. Here he stressed the role of the MJC as protector of the Muslim community against the purported moral corruption of gayness:

> We see and feel the anxiousness in our community. *Alhamdulillah* [All praises and gratitude are due to God], our community is trying to protect the integrity and purity of our [*din* religion]… Anything that goes against our *[din]* and which rejects the primary sources such the Qur'an and [Hadith] will be condemned by the MJC. We want to make sure that our *[din]* is protected and that the Muslim community is not fooled.[58]

The possibility of an authentic inclusion of queer sexualities in a sacred space was seen as the doorway to impurity and moral contamination, which needed to be protected against and rejected. What this overtly homophobic discourse shows is that the MJC and the "community" (as Fataar claims) experienced discomfort about the possibility of a queer-friendly Islam. The MJC's emphasis on preserving the purity of Islam is juxtaposed to gayness, which through its nature and existence, is framed as introducing impurity into the mosque. In this sense, the possibility of a

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[56] Nina Hoel. "Sexualising the Sacred, Sacralising Sexuality: An Analysis of Public Responses to Muslim Women's Religious Leadership in the Context of a Cape Town Mosque," *Journal for the Study of Religion, Vol. 26, No. 2 (2013):* 25-41.

[57] Hoel, *"Sexualising the Sacred,"* 30.

[58] As quoted in Cobus Coetzee. 2014. "'Open Mosque' to launch in Cape Town." Available online at: http://www.iol.co.za/news/south-africa/western-cape/open-mosque-to-launch-in-cape-town-1750826#.VlgKfnYrLDc [Accessed 8 October 2017].

sacred space being dominated by overt forms of queerness appears to question the very foundation of the sacrality of the mosque, its role and who constitutes its community. Within the context of human dignity, this constitutes a violation of the personhood of queer Muslims whose presence as queer bodies are cast as defiling and rendering the mosque impure – they are perceived as such an assault on the sacredness of the space, that it can no longer be considered a *masjid.*

The rejection of a queer-affirming mosque space could also indicate a wider anxiety with the increased visibility of queer Muslims in the South African public sphere. The Open Mosque saga illustrates that the possibility of a queer-friendly mosque space was so unthinkable to Muslims in South Africa, that they ignored the fact that an "open mosque" or a queer-affirming Muslim sacred space already existed, a few meters away. This might exemplify an instance of the "don't ask, don't tell" approach within the wider Muslim community towards sexual diversity, where Queer Muslims are tolerated perhaps even accepted, as long as they do not make a public claim to Islam.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to map out some of the political, sociological and theological complexities imbricated in issues of Islam, Muslims and queerness. Drawing on Jasbir K. Paur's theoretical lens of *Queer as Regulatory,* we argue that The Inner Circle presents on the one hand, a challenge to this regulatory framework by integrating Muslim and queer identities; and on the other hand, it appears complicit and compliant with the logic of the neo-liberal secular state as reflected in its participation in the exclusionary Cape Town Pride March. It would be important to track whether TIC in the future, develops a more nuanced and critical approach to questions of race and class *vis a vis* broader queer debates in Cape Town and nationally. Developing an intersectional approach would deepen TIC's capacity to address issues of sexual diversity more comprehensively within the local context. It would also enable them to facilitate a more robust engagement and application of Muslim liberation theology attentive to the complexity of the challenges within their socio-political milieu. In terms of TIC's internal religious identity we outlined their embrace of a supple interpretive approach to the Qur'an, and the broader Muslim tradition – approaches informed by liberationist lenses that foreground the lived experiences of marginalised readers of sacred texts and traditions. In the final section of this paper, we looked at the relationship between heteronormativity and Muslim centres of authority and orthopraxis in Cape Town, relationships that become most visible and explicit in times of public debate on questions of sexual diversity.

The Inner Circle presents a challenge to the hegemonic Muslim discourse presented by orthodox religious leaders in Cape Town on issues of sexual orientation. Resisting authoritarian homonormative religious narratives, TIC articulates an understanding of Islam, drawing on the readings of the Qur'an, to account for an Islamic vision that is free from discrimination based on gender and sexuality. The work and impact of The Inner Circle is crucial for many queer Muslims in South Africa and internationally – as reflected in the global reach of its programmes. It provides queer Muslims with a safe religious space – one that enables a reconciliation, alignment and integration between their queer and Muslim identities. TIC as an organisation, contributes to the contestation of religious authority within the South African Muslim community. In this regard, without necessarily or actively recognising it, TIC democratises religious authority and challenges the hegemony of heteronormative orthodox voices. The Inner Circle's intensive engagement with a broader history of Muslim contestation and debate, the ways it interrogates varying sources and forms of authority dominating Muslim tradition, and its focus on including the experiences, realities and subjectivities of Queer Muslims, present an invaluable trajectory of meaning-making within Muslim communities in the current historical moment. In all its complexity, the work of The Inner Circle represents within an African context, a new and emerging Muslim horizon for engaging questions of sexual diversity, social justice and religious belonging in the contemporary world.

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