

Homophobic Muslims: Emerging Trends in Multireligious Singapore

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INTRODUCTION

A professor at the National University of Singapore, who, in addition to his secular academic credentials, is also a nationally recognized Islamic religious leader, caused a public furor recently for making homophobic statements. Describing homosexuality using words like “cancers,” “impurities,” and “corruption,” he arrived at the conclusion that it needed to be “cleansed.” These remarks soon caught the attention of a disapproving public that accused the professor of producing hate speech. Many Muslims immediately jumped to the professor’s defense. His utterances should not be regarded as hate speech, they reasoned, because not only had he every right to exercise his academic freedom, but he was simply performing a religious duty by reminding Muslims of God’s disapproval of homosexuality. By making these arguments, the supporters who sought to rehabilitate the professor’s reputation reiterated and reproduced his anti-homosexual sentiments. This incident represented a new and emerging homophobia among Muslims in Singapore, who have historically never expressed such overt rejection of homosexuality. Through a close analysis of this incident and its aftermath, I will account for the shift in attitudes that caused Muslim believers to identify homosexuality as a problem that merited condemnation. In doing so, I make a case for how we ought to understand Muslim homophobia.

Let me begin by clarifying what I mean by Muslim homophobia. I take homophobia to mean “a psychologized fear or hatred of non-normative sexualities” (as defined by Tom Boellstorff) or “hatred and violence faced by

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people who engage in same-sex sexuality” (as defined by Don Kulick).¹ By attaching “Muslim” to this phenomenon, I am referring to how Muslim believers seek justification for homophobic attitudes in their religion. In their reasoning for why homosexuality should be rejected, Muslims in Singapore cited the founding texts of the Quran and the Hadith, especially the Quranic verses that condemn the acts of the tribe of the Prophet Lot (i.e., the people of Sodom and Gomorrah in the Hebrew Bible). These citational practices by Muslims suggest that their homophobia is religiously motivated. As Talal Asad put it, “Wherever Muslims have the power to regulate, uphold, require, or adjust *correct* practices, and to condemn, exclude, undermine, or replace *incorrect* ones, there is the domain of [religious] orthodoxy.”² But even though Islamic scriptures are used to justify homophobia, it is crucial to note that interpretations of these holy texts have always been multiple. For example, although the verses on the Prophet Lot are commonly understood to reflect a divine prohibition of homosexual behavior, other Muslim voices suggest that these verses were targeting other types of social misdemeanors instead of homosexuality.³ Pluralities in scriptural exegesis suggest, therefore, that what needs to be investigated are the conditions allowing Islamic scriptures to be interpreted by Muslims not only as being anti-homosexual but also requiring transformation into acts of hate.

Historically, Muslim responses towards non-normative genders and sexualities have not been singular (i.e., only prohibition), but rather deeply fragmented (i.e., they also included other responses such as tolerance and ambivalence). In her study of Indonesia, Singapore’s neighbor and the world’s most populous Muslim nation, Sharyn Graham Davies discovered that one of its largest ethnic groups, the Bugis, recognizes and accepts five genders: males, females, transgendered males, transgendered females, and androgynous persons.⁴ In fact Michael Peletz, in his survey of Southeast Asia from the fifteenth to the twenty-first centuries, concludes that the region is far more flexible and pluralistic in matters of gender and sexuality than people in most other areas.⁵ Such diversities in opinions were not only limited to Muslims in Southeast Asia. For example, Khaled el-Rouayheb,

¹ Tom Boellstorff, *The Gay Archipelago: Sexuality and Nation in Indonesia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 222; Don Kulick, “Can There Be an Anthropology of Homophobia?” in David Murray, ed., *Homophobias: Lust and Loathing across Time and Space* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 22.

² Talal Asad, *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, 1986), 15 (original italics).

³ Scott Kugle, *Homosexuality in Islam: Critical Reflection on Gay, Lesbian and Transgender Muslims* (Oxford: OneWorld Publications, 2010).

⁴ Sharyn Graham Davies, *Challenging Gender Norms: Five Genders among Bugis in Indonesia* (Belmont, Calif.: Thomson Wadsworth, 2007).

⁵ Michael Peletz, *Gender Pluralism: Southeast Asia since Early Modern Times* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

who is influenced by Michel Foucault's approach of historicizing desire, argues that the Arab-Islamic world in 1500–1800 lacked the concept of “homosexuality.”⁶ Instead, there were many competing registers—for example, active versus passive partner, passive infatuation versus sexual lust, anal versus non-anal intercourse—that were not seen as belonging to one overarching phenomenon. There was acquiescence for some types of homoerotic activity, such as expressing admiration for young male beauty in poetry, while condemnation was reserved for others, especially sodomy.⁷

Scholars have identified colonization as a pivotal moment in which attitudes towards non-normative sexualities began to shift in the Muslim world. In Arab societies, al-Rouayheb observes that from around the 1900s the prevailing tolerance for the expression of passionate infatuation for boys was eroded, owing partly to the adoption of European Victorian attitudes by the newly Westernized elites. Gradually, pederastic themes disappeared from Arabic poetry. Previously-held distinctions between varieties of same-sex eroticism collapsed and were replaced by a new umbrella category, *shudhudh jinsi*. Reflecting the modern European understanding of sexuality as an orientation or identity, *shudhudh jinsi* came to stand for “sexual perversion” or “sexual inversion”—in other words, it was similar to today's understanding of homosexuality as non-normative sexuality. A crucial effect of *shudhudh jinsi* was to introduce into modern Arab societies the sweeping rejection of all forms of same-sex eroticism as wrong. This attitude can be understood to be homophobia. Similarly, Peletz observes how colonial anxieties over native transgenderism and same-sex eroticism accelerated the constriction of Southeast Asian attitudes toward gender and sexuality and provided justification for civilizing missions necessitating a colonial presence.

In post-colonies like Singapore, therefore, it is important to consider how anti-homosexual interpretations of Islamic scriptures are informed by ideas about sexuality that emanate from Western countries. We need to investigate structures that enable such interactions. The law is one example: Singaporean Muslim condemnation of homosexuals was enabled by Section 377A, a colonial-era law criminalizing homosexuality, similar versions of which were introduced in other former British colonies like India, Bangladesh, and Malaysia. Non-state actors who promote Western sexual discourses also need to be examined. Joseph Massad, for instance, analyzes how “Gay International,” his term for the Euro-American-funded gay and lesbian organizations

⁶ Khaled El-Rouayheb, *Before Homosexuality in the Arab-Islamic World, 1500–1800* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

⁷ Other works that have recorded diversity in attitudes towards same-sex eroticism in Muslim societies, including: Kecia Ali, *Sexual Ethics and Islam: Feminist Reflections of Qur'an, Hadith, and Jurisprudence* (London: Oneworld, 2006); and Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

working in Islamic societies, imposes Euro-American cultural understandings onto Islamic societies.⁸ He argues that these organizations introduced rigid homo-hetero binaries that are not native to the Islamic Middle East, and which result in the assertion of heterosexual norms among the majority of Arabs. When such developments intersect with the global outreach of anti-homosexual groups like some American evangelical Christian organizations, according to Massad, the result is homophobia. The point about evangelical Christian activism is pertinent to Singapore, since homophobia among Singaporean Muslims, as I will show, is in part a reproduction of homophobic evangelical Christian activism that encodes a desire for the middle-class status occupied by evangelical Christians.

While the recent Singaporean Muslim homophobia is informed by the holy scriptures of Islam and the institutional legacies of colonialism, the trigger for its appearance is the contemporary neoliberal governance of the nation. As explained by Aihwa Ong, neoliberalism is not only an economic doctrine advocating a reduction of state influence over the market but also a mode of government that utilizes calculation and self-governing technologies.⁹ Under Singaporean neoliberal policies, the “pink dollar” became more valuable and thus encouraged gays and lesbians to be more vocal in the public sphere, but this also provoked anxieties over sexual iniquities, initially among evangelical Christians and subsequently among Muslims. Similar anti-homosexual panics animated by neoliberalism have been observed in other contexts. For example, Roger Lancaster describes widespread hysterias in the United States over pedophilia attributed to homosexual predators.¹⁰ He perceives this to be not only a continuation of old biases against homosexuals, but also a reflection of new paranoia caused by neoliberal economic restructuring that has left middle-class Americans financially vulnerable. The figure of the molested child at the center of U.S. sex panics is significant because it casts the state as the protective father figure. For Lancaster, such imageries reveal how the neoliberal U.S. state has become more punitive after 11 September 2001, as seen in the deployment of detention, torture, and domestic spying by George W. Bush’s administration as means of governance. In other words, U.S. sex panics reveal how neoliberal governance has caused ordinary Americans to be gripped by fear. Lancaster’s fine-grained analysis underscores the importance of not reducing contemporary homophobia to a singular determinant, but rather understanding it as a product of a complex array of political factors.

My analysis of the emerging homophobia among Muslims in Singapore is thus broadly concerned with the deployment of a particular religious orthodoxy

⁸ Joseph Massad, *Desiring Arabs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

⁹ Aihwa Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

¹⁰ Roger Lancaster, *Sex Panic and the Punitive State* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

within a particular configuration of contemporary politics. Singapore is a prosperous but tiny nation of about 276 square miles that offers a fascinating site for my theoretical interests. The state categorizes Singapore's population of 5.4 million people into four main ethnic groupings: 74 percent are Chinese, 13 percent Malays, and 9 percent Indians, and the remainder are classified as others. For citizens who profess a faith, the three largest categories are Buddhism/Taoism (44.2 percent of all believers, mostly Chinese), Christianity (18.3 percent, mostly Chinese, some Indians), and Islam (14.7 percent, mostly Malays, some Indians). While there are a variety of religious affiliations within the Chinese, Indian, and "others" ethnic groups, Malays are virtually universally Muslims. As such, they are often referred to by the hyphenated category Malay-Muslim. Owing in part to their over-representation in the lower-working class and their vocal assertion of religious rights (e.g., demanding that Muslim girls be allowed to wear headscarves in national schools), Malay-Muslims have continually been portrayed by the state as not having the nation's best interests at heart. From the mid-2000s, a golden opportunity to disrupt these state discourses presented itself. With a growing public visibility of gays and lesbians, the state broached a debate over whether a preexisting law criminalizing homosexuality should be repealed. Evangelical Christians (mostly middle-class Chinese) vigorously championed the retention of the law, presenting themselves as moral guardians of a state that had become too liberal. The emergence of evangelical Christians as opponents of homosexuality had the effect of encouraging Malay-Muslims toward homophobia. In contemporary Singapore, then, authoritative Islamic scriptures condemning homosexuality gained rhetorical power in a context of evangelical Christian activism, thus allowing Malay-Muslims to perform patriotism and express aspirations for upward mobility.

THE CONTROVERSY

Like many controversies in our digital age, the incident that sparked recent debates on homosexuality among Muslims in Singapore erupted on Facebook. It began with a seemingly quotidian posting by Syed Khairudin Aljunied, a professor of Malay Studies at the National University of Singapore, on his personal Facebook account. Although Professor Aljunied has secular educational credentials (he earned bachelors and masters degrees in history from the National University of Singapore and a Ph.D. in history from the School of Oriental and Asian Studies in London), he is regarded as a figure of religious authority among some Muslims in Singapore. An historian would not have gained such authority in medieval Muslim societies, where one had to undergo a decade-long Islamic seminary education (in a madrasa) before one could be regarded as an authority.¹¹ Disruptions to this traditional method of acquiring

¹¹ Jonathan Berkey, *The Transmission of Knowledge in Medieval Cairo: A Social History of Islamic Education* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

religious knowledge began at the turn of the twentieth century. Widespread availability of religious texts as a result of mass printing, as well as increases in literacy rates as a result of mass secular schooling meant that ordinary Muslims no longer needed to enroll in seminaries to acquire knowledge of the Islamic sciences. New channels of learning like independent reading became available and further multiplied with subsequent media innovations like cassette tapes, television, and the Internet.¹² Professor Aljunied embodies the new type of religious authority who did not attend seminary. Instead, his authority is built on the many leadership positions he has occupied in Muslim organizations in Singapore (including the Fellowship of Muslim Student Association), his scholarly writings on Muslim affairs in Southeast Asia, and his position as a professor in a department that primarily attracts Malay-Muslim undergraduates.

In addition to the talks and seminars he occasionally conducts at mosques, Professor Aljunied uses his personal website and Facebook page to propagate his views on religion.¹³ Since Facebook is a social media platform designed to be interactive, Professor Aljunied utilizes it to answer religious queries from Singaporean Muslims, particularly from the younger generation. Historically, questions-and-answers are the primary mechanism for the development of Islamic doctrine: it is by attending to the queries of ordinary Muslims regarding how existing religious regulations might apply in a new set of social circumstances that Islamic scholars help to expand the purview of Islamic law. In other words, the questions-and-answers in which Professor Aljunied partakes should not be taken as unimportant or nontraditional. In Islam, the response by a religious scholar to a question is known as a *fatwa* (a religious opinion). Before the advent of modernity, Muslims largely sought *fatwa* from juris consults as part of resolving legal disputes. Partly because of the media technologies that have made religious scholars more accessible than before, today's Muslims seek *fatwa* on any range of matters relating to piety, whether pertaining to ritual performances, marriage and divorce, or dietary practices.¹⁴ Professor Aljunied received a question on Islam's view on homosexuality and provided his deliberations on Facebook on 20 February 2014. The text is worth reproducing in full:

¹² Examples are: Dale Eickelman and Jon Anderson, eds., *New Media in the Muslim World: The Emerging Public Sphere* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999); and Charles Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

¹³ Professor Aljunied's webpage is named Deen Revival (www.deenrevival.com; *deen* is an Arabic word that could be translated as "the Islamic faith"). His personal Facebook account, however, was deactivated shortly after the controversy erupted in February 2014.

¹⁴ Brinkley Messick, *The Calligraphic State: Textual Domination and History in a Muslim Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

Liberal Islam, Lesbianism and the likes of it.

Question: Dear Prof, could you share about what we should do with this new development called liberal Islam which is now supporting the lesbian movement?

Answer: We must adopt a comprehensive and systematic strategy in dealing with such phenomenon which would inevitably affect our children's faith and social lives. Here are my recommendations:

1) Scholars and religious teachers (*asatizahs*) must speak up and write against these ideologies and practices. They are obligated to explain to the public the true meaning of what Islam is and sexuality as defined by the Quran and Sunnah. When the scholars and *asatizahs* are silent about these issues, corruption will spread like wild fire.

2) Parents and school teachers must be made aware of these challenges. They must detect early signs of waywardness from their children and students. Give advice, send them to proper religious classes and seek help from counsellors, if necessary. Win over the hearts of the misled youths and explain to them what is right with knowledge and wisdom. All social issues must be dealt with at home, if not, in schools.

3) The youths must assist scholars, *asatizahs*, parents and teachers to spread the message of true Islam in all media platforms. They have the power of technology in their hands and could play the crucial role of alerting groups and movements that are spreading the ideologies of liberal Islam and lesbianism and all other ideologies. Make the pure message of Islam viral to cleanse the impurities of liberal Islam and lesbianism.

Together, we will stop these cancers in their track!

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of this text is that Professor Aljunied singled out lesbians as abominable instead of denouncing homosexuals more generally. My guess is that the text was a response to a widely debated blog posting by a Malay-Muslim lesbian lamenting the barriers she faced in reconciling her sexuality with her ethnic and religious identities. Originally appearing online in 2013,¹⁵ the posting was republished in more mainstream venues one day before Professor Aljunied's statement.¹⁶ It is probable that the blog attracted so much online attention because the author had received a prestigious government scholarship to pursue her bachelor's degree in the U.K. In a nation that valorizes elitism, public scrutiny of scholarship recipients tends to be heightened. The more important point here, however, is that the Internet has become the leading arena for social and political debates in Singapore. Few viable alternatives are available in a state that is seldom tolerant of dissenting opinions: print and broadcast media are subject to censorship and public assemblies require a police permit. The spirited discussions in virtual communities have not gone unnoticed by the state. Several attempts have been made to regulate online discussions, ranging from rhetorical disapproval (Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong was reported to have said, "Satisfied people don't have

¹⁵ Fikri, "Fear and Loathing (as a 21-Year Old Queer) in Singapore," *Autostraddle*, 30 Aug. 2013: <http://www.autostraddle.com/things-i-fear-queer-singapore-190094/> (accessed 27 May 2016).

¹⁶ Some webpages where the article was re-posted include: "GPGT: Malay Lesbian Scholar and Her Beliefs," *Singapore Hardware Forum*, 19 Feb. 2014; and <http://forums.hardwarezone.com.sg/eat-drink-man-woman-16/gpgt-malay-lesbian-scholar-her-beliefs-4581924.html>; and "Malay Scholar Shares the Difficulty of Being a Lesbian in Singapore," *The Real Singapore*, 20 Feb. 2014: <http://therealsingapore.com/content/malay-scholar-shares-difficulty-being-lesbian-singapore> (both accessed 19 Apr. 2014).

time to go onto the Internet. Unhappy people go there”)¹⁷ to requiring online news sites to apply for licensing with the state’s media regulator, Media Development Authority.¹⁸ Despite such disciplinary measures, online discussions remain vibrant and thus provide much of the primary data for this article. I also draw from legal statutes, official statistics, political speeches, and newspaper reports.

Barely a fortnight later, Professor Aljunied’s posting elicited impassioned responses from both detractors and defenders. A petition written by three students from the National University of Singapore, Benjamin Seet, Melissa Tsang, and Khairulanwar Zaini, the last of whom self-identifies as Malay-Muslim, wrote that Professor Aljunied’s depiction of alternative sexualities as “wayward,” “cancers,” and “social diseases” that ought to be “cleansed” was tantamount to hate speech. Having garnered 239 signatories from among the campus population, the petition was sent to top university administrators.¹⁹ Supporters of Professor Aljunied (also primarily undergraduates from the university) began mobilizing online to retaliate against the original petition. A number of counter-petitions emerged, such as one titled “Letter of concern regarding Benjamin Seet, Melissa Tsang, and Khairulanwar Zaini.”²⁰ With a little over a thousand signatories, this counter-petition took the original petition writers to task for not being appropriately deferential to an educator and for not respecting Professor Aljunied’s rights to religious liberty and academic freedom. A Facebook fan page was then created for Professor Aljunied, which has been “liked” by over six thousand Facebook users.²¹ Faculty members joined in the fray, too, by submitting letters to the national presses; one argued that Professor Aljunied’s views fell within the ambit of academic freedom that should be respected,²² while others reprimanded Professor Aljunied’s intolerant and erroneous views on sexuality.²³ Due to publicity on social media and mainstream newspapers, what began as a tempest in a teacup escalated into a national debate that involved Muslims and non-Muslims. Perhaps eager to diffuse the tensions within the campus community, the university’s

¹⁷ The Prime Minister’s criticism of the Internet was widely reported in online news websites. For example: Cai Haoxiang, “Anti-Establishment Element Inherent in New Media: PM Lee,” *Business Times*, 25 Nov. 2013.

¹⁸ Media Development Authority, “Fact Sheet: Online News Sites to be Placed on a More Consistent Licensing Framework as Traditional News Platforms,” 28 May 2013.

¹⁹ The petition was published online on 28 Feb. 2014, about a week after Aljunied’s posting. It was subsequently deleted after the author of the petition was harassed by Aljunied’s supporters.

²⁰ Khairu Rejal, “Letter of Concern Regarding Benjamin Seet, Melissa Tsang and Khairulanwar Zaini,” *The Petition Site*, 1 Mar. 2014, <http://www.thepetitionsite.com/357/463/602/concern-over-academic-expression-and-religious-freedom-jeopardized-by-lbgt-activist-singapore/> (accessed 27 May 2016).

²¹ Facebook account, “Dr Syed Khairudin Aljunied (Public Figure),” <https://www.facebook.com/dr.syed.khairuddin.aljunied> (accessed 27 May 2016).

²² Reuben Wong, “Academic Freedom in Spotlight,” *Straits Times*, 7 Mar. 2104.

²³ Khoo Hoon Eng, “Sending Wrong Signal on Tolerance,” *Straits Times*, 6 Mar. 2014.

provost sent an email informing all faculty, staff, and students that Professor Aljunied had been “counselled by the university.”²⁴

Amidst these debates, several Singaporean Muslim organizations issued statements in support of Professor Aljunied. The lack of clergy or ecclesiastical structure within Islam gives autonomous Muslim organizations the opportunity to claim that they speak on behalf of Muslims. Every Muslim organization that backed Professor Aljunied made recourse to Islam’s authoritative texts, particularly the Quranic verses on Prophet Lot. The statement released by Muhammadiyah, an association offering educational and charitable services, asserted, “Homosexual acts or LGBT is denounced by Allah s.w.t. as stated in the Qur’an: ‘Do you approach males among the world. And leave what your Lord has created for you as mates? But you are a people transgressing the limits.’” The association also cited a Hadith that stated, “What I fear for you is following the acts of the people of Lot. Cursed is the person who does as they did. The Prophet repeated it there [*sic*] times: Allah curses those who act as the people of Lot, Allah curses those who act as the people of Lot, Allah curses those who act as the people of Lot.”²⁵ In a personal letter to Professor Aljunied, the Singapore Islamic Scholars and Religious Teachers Association (PERGAS) praised him for taking a stand against homosexuality, citing a Hadith that said, “Whoever sees an evil should change it with his hand. If he cannot, then with his tongue; and if he cannot even do that, then in his heart. That is the weakest degree of faith.”²⁶ The Fellowship of Muslim Students Association employed narratives of heroism in their statement, depicting Professor Aljunied as “an icon in the Malay/Muslim community” who was standing up to the reprobate homosexuals—the “Neo-Sodom-Gomorrah community” who were working to “mainstream and legalize LGBT values and lifestyle in Singapore” and undermine “family, the core institution of society.”²⁷

The story of the Prophet Lot (who appears in numerous verses of the Quran) has been a constant referent in classical and contemporary discussions on homosexuality. According to the Quran (e.g., 26: 169–75; 27: 54–58), God sent Lot to command the people of Sodom and Gomorrah to cease their lustful and violent acts and embrace monotheism. But the tribe rejected Lot’s prophecy; its men, in particular, continued to treat male strangers with inhospitality and raped them. Having incurred God’s wrath, the tribe was subsequently annihilated. Among the medieval Muslim jurists who would set the foundations

²⁴ Pearl Lee, “NUS Professor ‘Counselled’ by University for Facebook Posting on Lesbianism,” *Straits Times*, 5 Mar. 2014.

²⁵ Muhammadiyah Association, “Muhammadiyah’s Response to the Development of LGBT in Singapore,” 26 Mar. 2014.

²⁶ The letter of support from PERGAS to Professor Aljunied was written on 12 March 2014, and posted on the Aljunied fan page on Facebook.

²⁷ Fellowship of Muslim Students Association, “FMSA Position on Letter of Concern to NUS Provost on Associate Professor Dr Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied,” 3 Mar. 2014.

for Islamic law, these verses were largely interpreted as a prohibition on homosexuality, specifically male-on-male anal penetration.²⁸ Scholars have recently sought to reinterpret Lot's story, among them the Islamic studies scholar Scott Kugle.²⁹ Kugle is influenced by contemporary reformist thinkers like Fazlur Rahman, Amina Wadud, and Khaled Abou el Fadl who are working to revise established doctrines that are at odds with values like justice, equality, plurality, and respect for the inherent dignity of human beings—values they argue are central to Islam. For these scholars, Quranic interpretations cannot be severed from context; literal readings are therefore erroneous. Kugle examines other aspects of Lot's story beyond the same-sex acts (describing, for example, how the people of Sodom and Gomorrah also committed murder and robbery) and argues that the same-sex acts were not problematic per se, but because they involved aggression and subjugating others by force (in other words, rape). For Kugle, the verses on Lot should not be narrowly understood as prohibitions against sexual transgression but as containing guidance against the dangers of spiritual corruption and violence more broadly.³⁰

In Singapore, however, the reinterpretations offered by scholars like Kugle have not taken root except among a minority of Muslims. The anti-homosexuality exegesis of Lot's story remains the authoritative one. Singaporean scholars like Noor Aisha Abdul Rahman and Azhar Ibrahim suggest that Malay-Muslim religious scholars tend to be deeply conservative in their attitudes, especially in their resistance towards ideas and practices that are perceived as "Western" in origin and hence lacking an Islamic basis.³¹ The prevailing religious milieu in Singapore is thus a barrier to the wide acceptance of revisionist efforts undertaken by scholars like Kugle, whose sophisticated methodology combines a grounding in both the Islamic heritage and Western human sciences (which include the humanities, social sciences, and human

²⁸ Ali points out, however, that there is no juridical consensus on whether the Quran mentions female same-sex activity (*Sexual Ethics*, 81).

²⁹ Kugle, *Homosexuality in Islam*.

³⁰ For a doctrinal argument to be considered as authoritative in Islam, it must have a genealogy to the works of classical scholars who set the foundations for Islamic law. When presenting his reinterpretations of the story of Lot, Kugle emphasizes that he is building on the views of famous Andalusian jurist Ibn Hazm (d. 1064). While Ibn Hazm accepted that homosexuality was forbidden by the Quran, he disagreed with other jurists about the punishment that should be applied in cases of male-to-male sodomy. Ibn Hazm was convinced that the tribe of Lot was punished by God not only for their homosexual practices but also for their unbelief. Ibn Hazm's views were significant, according to Kugle, because it showed a lack of consensus among key Islamic jurists of the classical period, suggesting therefore that consensus should not be expected in the present-day and that the established doctrines regarding homosexuality should be open to scrutiny and revision.

³¹ Azhar Ibrahim, "Discourses on Islam in Southeast Asia and Their Impact on the Singapore Muslim Public," in Lai Ah-Eng, ed., *Religious Diversity in Singapore* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008), 83–115; and Noor Aisha Abdul Rahman, "The Muslim Religious Elite in Singapore," in Lai Ah-Eng, ed., *Religious Diversity in Singapore* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008), 248–74.

rights) in order to construct alternative epistemologies on Islam. While their esoteric vocabulary and cerebral forms of reasoning may be appealing to the highest educated believers, they are often met with confusion on the part of ordinary believers, and rejection and attacks from established religious authorities have continually occurred. At this historical moment, the revisionists are, as Carol Kersten suggests, cosmopolitans to few and heretics to many.³²

GOVERNING HOMOSEXUALITY

I have argued that the recent homophobia among Malay-Muslims was justified using Islamic scriptures. In what follows, I will show that such interpretations of Islam's holy texts were partly influenced by preexisting evangelical Christian homophobia. These Christian-Muslim interactions were made possible by continuing colonial legacies as well as new neoliberal policies. Before tracing these developments, however, we must begin by understanding Singapore's political context. Singapore attained independence in 1965 following the end of British colonial rule in 1963 and a brief membership in the Federation of Malaysia in 1963–1965. Its Westminster-style parliament has been under the singular control of the People's Action Party (PAP), which consistently utilizes tactics such as gerrymandering, litigation, and smear campaigns to undermine opposition parties during elections. Laws governing media content and public assemblies are vehicles for containing popular political dissent. Arguably the most fearsome law is the Internal Security Act, which allows detention without trial of people deemed to be security threats against the nation. In 1987, for example, twenty-two local activists affiliated with the Roman Catholic Church were detained under this Act, accused of hatching a "Marxist conspiracy" to subvert Singapore's political system.³³

Until recently, such autocratic measures defined how the state managed homosexuality. Homosexuality is illegal in Singapore. Section 377A of the Penal Code, which is based on an 1885 English provision and introduced to Singapore in 1938 during British colonial rule, criminalizes oral and anal sex between two consenting adult males whether in public or in private. Punishment is imprisonment of up to two years. Prior to the early 2000s, Section 377A was actively enforced: police entrapment, for example, was a common strategy employed at gay cruising areas. Other laws reinforced the homophobic principle behind 377A, one being the Singapore Broadcasting Act (Cap. 297)

³² Carol Kersten, *Cosmopolitan and Heretics: New Muslim Intellectuals and the Study of Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

³³ A number of scholars (e.g., C. M. Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore, 1819–2005* [Singapore: NUS Press, 2009]) have pointed out that the "Marxist conspirators" were in fact church activists advancing the cause of poor, migrant workers. They were arrested as part of the state's attempt to limit the political influence of the Roman Catholic Church, which was an advocate of liberation theology, a movement that had popular support among the underclass in Latin America and the Philippines.

of 1997 that prohibited “contents which depict or propagate sexual perversions such as homosexuality, lesbianism, and paedophilia.”³⁴ Gays also faced extra-legal sanctions. During the two-year compulsory military service, for example, it was the army’s policy to send openly gay soldiers for psychiatric assessment and deploy them to non-sensitive military units where they would be barred from staying overnight at camp. State prohibition on homosexuality was but one component in a broader project to police morality in Singapore. Since forming its government after independence, the state has presented itself as a moral state intolerant of vices like corruption, nepotism, pornography, gambling, drugs, and homosexuality.

The standards of morality guarded by the state were presented as integral to “Asian Values.” As discussed by Michael Peletz, “Asian Values” is a political discourse articulated in the 1990s by the political leaders of Singapore, Malaysia, and elsewhere in the Asia-Pacific.³⁵ Tied to the phenomenal postwar economic growth of Asian economies from Japan and South Korea in the northeast to Singapore and Malaysia in the southeast, the “Asian Values” discourse proposes that Asian nations were fundamentally different from Western nations and cannot be expected to follow similar developmental paths. Asian politicians argued that loyalty to the family was central to “Asian Values,” which meant that Western-style democracy, civil society, and human rights—all of which protected individual rights—were incompatible with Asian nations. In former British colonies, the “Asian Values” discourse enabled post-colonial leaders to reproduce the anti-homosexuality biases of the colonial government, but by recasting homosexuality as “Western.” Peletz examines the situation in Malaysia, where the espousal of “Asian Values” in the 1990s coincided with important local developments (such as rapid urbanization) and global trends (especially the HIV/AIDS crisis), which resulted in greater visibility of homosexuals and transgenders in urban areas. Consequently, non-normative genders and sexualities were branded as anti-family and un-Asian. This produced systematic efforts to delegitimize or eliminate them completely, all in the name of “Asian Values.”

In the new millennium, however, Singaporean political leaders began to tone down their disparagement of homosexuality as the “Asian Values” discourse declined in popularity. Aihwa Ong notes the disappearance of the discourse following the 1997–1998 Asian financial crisis that brought about

³⁴ Consistent with the state’s liberalization since the early 2000s, the updated broadcasting regulation, the Free-to-Air Television Programme Code (Media Development Authority, 2012), adopted a less condemnatory tone towards homosexuality and allowed for restricted screening of films with homosexual content: “Films that depict a homosexual lifestyle should be sensitive to community values. They should not, promote or justify a homosexual lifestyle. However, non-exploitative and non-explicit depictions of sexual activity between two persons of the same gender may be considered for R21.”

³⁵ Peletz, *Gender Pluralism*, 199–206.

reduced earnings from manufacturing as well as global pressures to deregulate markets.³⁶ This spurred a neoliberal turn in Singapore intended to transform it into a global knowledge-based economy. As Singapore opened its borders to transnational venture capitalists, biomedical expertise, and entrepreneurial innovation (as Ong has documented), the state began to recognize homosexuals as important contributors to a creative economy. Thus, in an interview with *Time* in 2003, then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong revealed that the government had begun to employ homosexuals even in sensitive jobs, whereas “in the past, if we know you’re gay, we would not employ you.”³⁷ Current Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, in a parliamentary speech on 23 October 2007, also held that homosexuals in Singapore “include people who are responsible and valuable, highly respected contributing members of society.” Audrey Yue calls such attitudes “illiberal pragmatism,”³⁸ which refers to how the Singaporean state essentially ascribes to illiberal values regarding homosexuality, but adopts a pragmatic attitude when it comes to promoting economic development. In other words, as the “pink dollar” becomes more valuable to the economy, homosexuality becomes more tolerable.

Neoliberal economic reforms in Singapore eventually brought about greater political freedoms, in part because the state was eager to foster the critical thinking skills essential for a knowledge-based economy, but also because a growing middle class began questioning the domination of the ruling party PAP. Goh Chok Tong (Prime Minister 1990–2004) departed from the authoritarian style of his predecessor Lee Kuan Yew (1965–1990) and began allowing for limited civil society debate and critique, with further relaxations occurring under the current administration of Lee Hsien Loong (2004–). A significant innovation was the establishment of the Speaker’s Corner at Hong Lim Park where Singaporeans can make public speeches without applying for a license. Though routinely dismissed as a token gesture, there has been increasing leniency in the policies governing the use of the Speaker’s Corner since its launch in 2000—from 2008, for example, the state allowed exhibitions, performances, and demonstrations to take place there.³⁹ Parallel advances occurred in gay activism. As Lynette Chua has documented, the number of gay activist organizations mushroomed starting in 2000 and worked to provide support services to gays and lesbians, raise public awareness about homosexuality, and lobby the state.⁴⁰ Since 2008, the Speaker’s Corner has hosted the Pink Dot, Singapore’s version of gay pride. Unlike pride events in major cities globally,

³⁶ Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception*, 177–94.

³⁷ David Clive Price, “Singapore: It’s In to Be Out,” *Time Magazine*, 10 Aug. 2003.

³⁸ Audrey Yue and Jun Zubillaga-Pow, eds., *Queer Singapore: Illiberal Citizenship and Mediated Cultures* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2013), 2.

³⁹ Lynette Chua, “Pragmatic Resistance, Law, and Social Movements in Authoritarian States: The Case of Gay Collective Action in Singapore,” *Law & Society Review* 46, 4 (2012): 713–48.

⁴⁰ Chua, “Pragmatic Resistance.”

Pink Dot's participants do not march down the streets but instead wear pink, have a picnic at the park, and watch musical performances. According to estimates, the inaugural Pink Dot in 2009 drew a thousand participants;⁴¹ in 2014, twenty-six thousand people showed up.⁴²

With a growing gay activism and a state more accommodating towards political liberties, the stage was set for a polarizing public debate over homosexuality. Conflict lines were drawn in 2007 when Nominated Member of Parliament Siew Kum Hong, amidst a comprehensive review of the Penal Code, petitioned for the repeal of Section 377A that criminalized homosexuality.⁴³ The neoliberal state, however, expressed reticence in dictating acceptable standards of morality in the nation, and opted to defer to a self-governing public. In a parliamentary debate over Section 377A, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong stated, "When it comes to issues like the economy, technology, education, we better stay ahead of the game," but on issues concerning moral values, "we will let others take the lead, we will stay one step behind the front line of change."⁴⁴ As Jianlin Chen has observed, public narratives produced in relation to Section 377A were reminiscent of the U.S. culture wars over homosexuality. Supporters of repealing Section 377A argued for "liberty" and "equality," for example, whereas supporters of keeping it stressed the importance of defending "traditional family values" against the "homosexual agenda."⁴⁵ I will discuss the debate in more detail shortly, but first let me point out that the state's final decision reflected a compromise between the two competing positions. The state retained Section 377A, citing the conservative attitude of the majority of the population. At the same time, it underscored that the law would not be enforced against private sexual acts between consenting adults and that there should be some tolerance of homosexuals in society. Janet Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini's observations of homosexuality in the United States can also be applied to the Singapore state's 377A decision: the discourse of tolerance merely mitigates an undemocratic position but is ultimately a poor substitute for full acceptance of homosexuals.⁴⁶

⁴¹ Nur Dianah Suhaimi, "Pink Event Draws 1,000," *Straits Times*, 17 May 2009.

⁴² Aw Cheng Wei, "26,000 Turn Up at Annual LGBT Rally at Hong Lim Park: Pink Dot Spokesman," *Straits Times*, 28 June 2014.

⁴³ Nominated Members of Parliament are not elected by citizens, but are instead selected by a committee of elected Members of Parliament. They do not have affiliations with any political party and have limited voting powers. The government created the role in 1990 in order to increase independent voices in Parliament without diluting the ruling party's dominance.

⁴⁴ Terence Chong, "Filling the Moral Void: The Christian Right in Singapore," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 41, 4 (2011): 566–83.

⁴⁵ Jianlin Chen, "Singapore's Culture War over Section 377a: Through the Lens of Public Choice and Multilingual Research," *Law & Social Inquiry* 38, 1 (2013): 107–37.

⁴⁶ Janet Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini, *Love the Sin: Sexual Regulation and the Limits of Religious Tolerance* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004).

By signaling its intent to let society determine the parameters of morality, the state created an opportunity that was quickly seized upon by evangelical Christians.⁴⁷ Their eagerness to claim ownership over society's morality underscores their social prominence. Since the 1970s, there have been steady increases in conversion to Christianity, largely among young, middle-class, and university-educated Chinese. Though initially conversions were to mainline denominations, the overwhelmingly popular choice for conversion since the 1990s has been to evangelical and Pentecostal churches. Mainline denominations that have continued to attract adherents are those that have embraced evangelism and charismatic renewal, notably the Anglicans and Methodists.⁴⁸ Evangelicalism arrived in Singapore largely through the outreach efforts of U.S. evangelists. The influential preacher Billy Graham was perhaps the first to visit Singapore in 1978, attracting over 330,000 people to his speeches at the National Stadium, of whom it was claimed nearly twenty thousand were converted.⁴⁹ Scholars have offered a variety of explanations for evangelical Christianity's popularity in Singapore.⁵⁰ One is that its promotion of capitalist economies is compatible with the consumerist ethos of young, affluent Singaporeans. Another has to do with the previously discussed 1987 extrajudicial detention of church activists accused of concocting a "Marxist conspiracy" when they worked to improve the plight of migrant workers. The detention made an enemy of liberation theology and consequently diminished the appeal of Catholicism.

During the debate over Section 377A, evangelical Christians were the staunchest supporters of retaining the law. Their parliamentary advocate was the Nominated Member of Parliament and law professor Thio Li-Ann.⁵¹ Tropes contained in the speech Thio gave in Parliament in defense of Section 377A reveal important cultural assumptions that evangelicals have

⁴⁷ Among evangelical ministries in Singapore, four megachurches with the largest congregations and financial reserves (Lighthouse Evangelism, New Creation Church, City Harvest Church, and Faith Community Baptist Church) often take the lead in expressing the evangelical perspective on social issues, including homosexuality. While there is a nascent pro-gay evangelical movement in the United States, a corresponding movement has not taken root in Singapore.

⁴⁸ Daniel Goh, "State and Social Christianity in Post-Colonial Singapore," *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 25, 1 (2010): 54–89.

⁴⁹ Anne Marie Chilton, "Tens of Thousands in Singapore Open Homes to Share Christ," *Billy Graham Evangelistic Association*, 24 Dec. 2008, <http://billygraham.org/story/tens-of-thousands-in-singapore-open-homes-to-share-christ/> (accessed 27 May 2016).

⁵⁰ Goh, "State and Social Christianity"; Joy Tong Kooi Chin, "McDonaldization and the Megachurches: A Study of City Harvest, Singapore," in Pattana Kitiarsa, ed., *Religious Commodification in Asia: Marketing God* (London: Routledge, 2008), 186–204.

⁵¹ Thio was scheduled to teach two courses at the New York University law school as a visiting professor in the fall of 2009. Following protests from NYU students over her anti-gay views, she cancelled the courses. See: Winnie Hu, "Citing Opposition, Professor Calls Off NYU Appointment," *New York Times*, 22 July 2009.

about the world.⁵² Although the debate elicited an assortment of responses from the public regarding Section 377A—including impartiality, ambivalence, and a “live and let live” attitude⁵³—Thio characterized the debate as a battle between two camps: “liberals,” whom she defined as those concerned for the protection of individual liberty and rights to privacy, and “conservatives.” Thio argued that “conservative” should be equated with conservation: “environmental conservation protects our habitat; the moral ecology must be conserved to protect what is precious and sustains a dynamic, free and good society.” Section 377A, according to her, is intended to conserve public sexual morality and “buttress strong families based on faithful union between man and wife, the best model for raising children.” She warned against an ever-expanding homosexual agenda where “homosexual activists lobby hard for a radical sexual revolution, waging a liberal fundamentalist crusade against traditional morality.” If an inch was given by repealing Section 377A, they would take a mile next.

Thio’s narrative construction can best be understood in relation to the history of the U.S. evangelicalism, to which Singaporean evangelicals trace their doctrinal ancestry. A movement that began in the 1950s in the United States, evangelical Christianity gained popularity through the efforts of preachers like Billy Graham, whose media savvy enabled him to create radio and television programs reaching audiences of millions. According to Susan Harding, evangelicalism grew out of Protestant fundamentalism, a conservative movement that emerged in the early 1900s and sought to wrest control over doctrines, education, and the definition of Protestant Christianity from liberal Protestants.⁵⁴ For conservative Protestants, “fundamentalist” was embraced as a positive term meaning to fight for the fundamentals of the faith. In theological contests of the early 1900s, neither liberal nor fundamentalist Protestants were truly able to taint the other’s image. Harding suggests that the turning point was the 1925 Scopes trial over whether modern scientific views on evolution should be taught in schools, which the fundamentalists opposed, believing that evolutionary theory contradicted what the Bible said about the creation of the world. The Scopes trial was a polyvocal event drawing varying responses from preachers, lawyers, scientists, politicians, and journalists. Yet these participants helped to create a representation of the conflict in binary terms—evolution versus creationism, fundamentalism versus modernism, liberalism versus conservatism.

Saddled with accusations of narrow-mindedness and obscurantism, fundamentalist Protestants withdrew from activism after the Scopes trial until their

⁵² “377A Serves Public Morality: NMP Thio Li-Ann,” *Online Citizen*, 23 Oct. 2007, <http://www.theonlinecitizen.com/2007/10/377a-serves-public-morality-nmp-thio-li-ann/> (accessed 27 May 2016).

⁵³ Chen, “Singapore’s Culture War.”

⁵⁴ Susan Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

reappearance as evangelicals in the 1950s. Whereas fundamentalists saw the teaching of evolution as a threat to the conservative social order, evangelicals saw challenges forming within the domains of sexuality and reproduction with the rise of feminist and gay rights movements in the 1960s. As such, evangelical activism has been concerned with issues like abortion, premarital sex, divorce, and homosexuality.⁵⁵ Importantly, evangelicals often conceptualize their activism using the language of an irreconcilable chasm that was established during the Scopes trial. Thus, according to Harding, “Contemporary conservative Protestants put various labels on their opponents in these contests—they were liberals, secular humanists, feminists, homosexuals, pornographers, abortionists, and, all together, emissaries of Satan.”⁵⁶

While both are responses to modernity, it is important to distinguish Protestant conservatism from Muslim conservatism. With its American origins, the former defines itself vis-a-vis the dangers of liberalism, which is why Section 377A’s supporter Thio Li-Ann portrayed the battle lines as being drawn between conservatives and liberals. But Muslim responses toward the encroachment of modernity grew out of a different context, the experience of European colonization. What were understood to be threats to the Muslim social order were therefore not issues like evolution, abortion, or homosexuality, but rather the eradication of Muslim practices and institutions by colonial governments and new Westernized elites. Scholars have identified Islamic law,⁵⁷ the madrasa,⁵⁸ and the headscarf⁵⁹ as arenas of contention around which Muslims have rallied to preserve. These tensions have persisted under post-independence secular governments. It is thus unsurprising that numerous scholars of Singapore have documented Malay-Muslim dissent from the state over the very same set of issues.⁶⁰ In 1998, Malay-Muslims opposed the state’s proposal to amend the Administration of Muslim Law Act, perceiving this as an attempt to curtail Islamic law in Singapore.⁶¹ In 2000, Malay-Muslims rejected

⁵⁵ Constance Sullivan-Blum, “It’s Adam and Eve, Not Adam and Steve,” in David Murray, ed., *Homophobic: Lust and Loathing across Time and Space* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 48–63; Faye Ginsburg, *Contested Lives: The Abortion Debate in an American Community* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

⁵⁶ Harding, *Book of Jerry Falwell*, 63.

⁵⁷ Wael Hallaq, *Shari’a: Theory, Practice, Transformations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

⁵⁸ Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam: Custodians of Change* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

⁵⁹ Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

⁶⁰ Hussin Mutalib, *Singapore Malays: Being Ethnic Minority and Muslim in a Global City-State* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2012); Kamaludeen Mohamed Nasir, Alexius Pereira, and Bryan Turner, *Muslims in Singapore: Piety, Politics and Policies* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

⁶¹ The Administration of Muslim Law Act was passed in 1966 and defined the powers and jurisdiction of three key Muslim institutions: the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore, the Syariah Court, and the Registry of Muslim Marriages.

state attempts to implement the curriculum used in national schools onto madrasas, fearing that this would result in the closures of madrasas.⁶² In 2001–2002, after four schoolgirls were suspended for wearing headscarves, Malay-Muslims rallied to persuade the state to permit headscarves in national schools.⁶³ With Malay-Muslims embedded in debates over institutions and practices perceived as foundational to a Muslim social order, there was a dearth of discourse on homosexuality in the early 2000s, even though Malay-Muslims did not necessarily approve of it. Jianlin Chen observes there was minimal Malay-Muslim engagement with Section 377A and notes that the few articles published in the Malay-language press and a statement from PERGAS, all of which supported Section 377A, were essentially flogging a dead horse since they appeared after the state had passed its decision on the law.⁶⁴

The prevailing lack of Muslim concern regarding homosexuality began to change in 2014, when a condemnatory tone was adopted. A change in attitude occurred after the state-sponsored Health Promotion Board put a set of Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) on sexuality up on their website in November 2013.⁶⁵ The section on homosexuality, which generated a storm of controversy, contained entries written rather matter-of-factly. For example: Question: “Can homosexuals have long lasting relationships?” Answer: “Yes, homosexuals can certainly have long-lasting relationships. A homosexual relationship, like any other relationship, is based on values like trust, love, commitment and support.” Question: “Is my child normal? Is being gay or bisexual a mental illness?” Answer: “Homosexuality and bisexuality are not mental illnesses. Studies show that sexual orientation has no bearing on mental health or emotional stability.” The initial salvo was fired in February 2014 by an anonymously-written online petition. Denouncing the FAQs for its “implicit pro-homosexuality stance which ... is detrimental to our society,” it gathered some twenty-six thousand signatures.⁶⁶ Whereas PERGAS had arrived late to the game in the debate over Section 377A, it was now right on cue, releasing a media statement stating, “The message (in the FAQs) should be directed at the importance of a traditional family unit rather than implicitly showing support towards same-sex behavior.”⁶⁷ So proactive was PERGAS that it allowed Pastor Lawrence Khong of Faith Community Baptist Church—perhaps the

⁶² In response to the opposition from Malay-Muslims, the government decided not to implement the national curriculum in madrasas. However, madrasa students must sit for national examinations and attain the assessment standards set by the Ministry of Education.

⁶³ Despite public protest, the headscarf remains prohibited for students in national schools.

⁶⁴ Chen, “Singapore’s Culture War.”

⁶⁵ Health and Promotion Board, “FAQs on Sexuality,” 27 Aug. 2014, <http://www.hpb.gov.sg/HOPPportal/health-article/HPB056342> (accessed 27 May 2016).

⁶⁶ Aaron, “Review HPB’s ‘FAQ on Sexuality,’” *Go Petition*, 3 Feb. 2014, <http://www.gopetition.com/petitions/review-hpbs-faq-on-sexuality.html> (accessed 27 May 2016).

⁶⁷ PERGAS, “PERGAS’ Response to HPB’s FAQ on Sexuality,” 11 Feb. 2014.

most vociferously anti-gay evangelical pastor in Singapore—to form his own arguments against the FAQs. Pastor Khong wrote an open letter to the Health Minister demanding that the FAQs be taken offline in part because it offended the sensibilities of religious believers, citing PERGAS’s opposition toward it.⁶⁸ The Ministry of Health, however, retained the FAQs, stating that while it did not support homosexuality, it needed to do its job of dispensing health advice.⁶⁹

Seen in this context, the incident involving Professor Aljunied (which occurred a month after the debates over the FAQs) represents a continuation of an emerging Malay-Muslim discourse of homophobia. Whereas PERGAS had been one of the first and few voices to vilify homosexuality, many more institutions and individuals made anti-homosexual statements in the attempt to deflect criticisms from Professor Aljunied. Interestingly, Malay-Muslim homophobia seems to signify a new chapter in Muslim-evangelical relations in Singapore, which have been tense historically. Aggressive Christian evangelical proselytizing in the 1980s angered so many Muslims (as well as Buddhists and Hindus)⁷⁰ that the government passed the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act in 1990 aimed at preventing hostility between religious groups. Today, shared concerns regarding homosexuality seem to have brought Malay-Muslims and evangelical Christians together. An evangelical influence can be observed, for example, in the title of Professor Aljunied’s controversial Facebook posting, “Liberal Islam, lesbianism and the likes of it.” Again, the link made between liberalism and homosexuality is a narrative construction that is born out of evangelical Christian history rather than from Muslim anxieties over the disruption of their social order. Malay-Muslim invocation of tropes like “traditional family values” and “the homosexual agenda” are similarly borrowed. As a result, evangelical Christians have come to recognize Malay-Muslims as allies in policing homosexuality.⁷¹ It is therefore no

⁶⁸ Lawrence Khong, “An Open Letter to Mr. Gan Kim Yong, Minister for Health,” 26 Feb. 2014, <http://www.febc.org.sg/about/news/open-letter-mr-gan-kim-yong-minister-health> (accessed 27 May 2016).

⁶⁹ Ministry of Health, “Response to HPB’s FAQs on Sexuality,” 17 Feb. 2014, http://www.moh.gov.sg/content/moh_web/home/pressRoom/Parliamentary_QA/2014/hpb-sexuality.html (accessed 27 May 2016).

⁷⁰ Kuah Khun Eng, “Maintaining Ethno-Religious Harmony in Singapore,” *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 28, 1 (1998): 103–21.

⁷¹ Evangelicals and Malay-Muslims have continued to converge in condemning homosexuality beyond the events discussed in this article. A recent example is the Wear White campaign, organized on 28 June 2014 by Muslim youths who were concerned that Pink Dot fell on the same day as the start of Ramadan (<http://www.wearwhite.sg/> [accessed 27 May 2016]). While the intention of the campaign was to encourage Muslims to wear white on the first day of Ramadan (as a rejection of LGBT supporters wearing pink), Pastor Lawrence Khong supported this movement by calling on his congregation to also wear white when attending an anti-Pink Dot “family worship” service on 29 June. “Thousands from Two Church Groups Turn Up in White, Say Organisers,” *Straits Times*, 29 June 2014.

surprise that Pastor Khong released a statement defending Professor Aljunied. The professor's opinions fell within the legitimate purview of academic freedom, said the pastor, whereas the truly intolerant were the homosexuals who appeared ready to discredit anyone who disagreed with them.⁷²

Talal Asad has argued that Muslim determinations of right and wrong are made in relation to tradition, or the bodies of knowledge that trace back to the foundational scriptures of Quran and Hadith and have been transmitted by religious authorities. This framework was adopted by Saba Mahmood in her important ethnographic work on the women's mosque movement in Egypt, where she examines the pedagogical processes through which Muslim women come to align the conduct of their daily lives with the teachings of tradition.⁷³ While recognizing the usefulness of this approach, more recent works have argued against a coherent or bounded formulation of tradition. Amira Mittermaier stresses the importance of formulating tradition as heteroglossic, and argues that the conservative model of Islam to which Mahmood's subjects ascribe should not be taken as paradigmatic of Islam.⁷⁴ Samuli Schielke, on the other hand, points out that Muslim ethics are formed not in relation to tradition alone, but also according to aims that are framed as non-religious, such as finding a job or a romantic partner.⁷⁵ Following Mittermaier and Schielke, I wish to add nuance to the concept of tradition by offering another possibility regarding its operation. I suggest that the disciplinary power of the Islamic tradition can be magnified when it comes into contact with comparable arguments from another religious tradition. This appears to be the case in Singapore's multi-religious context, where Muslim condemnation of homosexuality is informed not only by an authoritative interpretation of Lot's story but also by evangelical activism against homosexuality.

MINORITY ANXIETIES

Why would Malay-Muslims adopt evangelical Christian anti-gay discourse? It is, I suggest, the outcome of rising Muslim conservatism in the broader Southeast Asian region that is inflected by local political dynamics in Singapore. Scholars have observed a "conservative turn" in Southeast Asian Muslim societies in recent years fueled by a complex array of factors including the religious revitalization of Islam since the 1970s, the expansion of Muslim middle classes, and crises of secular democracy allowing conservative religious factions to

⁷² Lawrence Khong, Facebook posting, 6 Mar. 2014, <https://www.facebook.com/lawrence.khong.fcbc/posts/715480518496065> (accessed 27 May 2016).

⁷³ Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

⁷⁴ Amira Mittermaier, "Dreams from Elsewhere: Muslim Subjectivities beyond the Trope of Self-Cultivation," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 18, 2 (2012): 247–65.

⁷⁵ Samuli Schielke, "Second Thoughts about the Anthropology of Islam, or How to Make Sense of Grand Schemes in Everyday Life," *ZMO Working Papers* 2 (2010).

emerge as influential political contenders.⁷⁶ In the push for a stricter observance of Islamic laws, homosexuality has emerged as an object of vilification of the conservative Islamic discourse. In Indonesia, for example, there has been an increase in assaults on gays and transgenders by Islamist vigilante groups; in Malaysia, Anwar Ibrahim was ousted from his position as Deputy Prime Minister after being accused and convicted of being a homosexual (which his supporters and human rights groups decry as a political fix-up).⁷⁷ As Michael Peletz has argued, these recent attacks on homosexuals could be seen as a continuation of earlier developments like the anti-gay colonial laws and the “Asian Values” discourse that contribute to the further restriction of Southeast Asia’s famed tolerance for non-normative genders and sexualities. Importantly, because the citizens of Indonesia and Malaysia are predominantly Muslims and Malays (or peoples originating from the Malay Archipelago), the attacks on homosexuals have been presented to the public as defenses of Islam and of Malay culture.

However, similar arguments cannot be made in Singapore, whose population has a different ethnic and religious composition from its neighbors. Singaporean Muslims are predominantly Malays, a minority ethnic group acknowledged as the indigenous people of the nation. Article 152 of the Singapore Constitution (pertaining to “Minorities and Special Position of Malays”) states, “The Government shall exercise its functions in such manner as to recognize the special position of the Malays, who are the indigenous people of Singapore, and accordingly it shall be the responsibility of the Government to protect, safeguard, support, foster and promote their political, educational, religious, economic, social and cultural interests and the Malay language.” Singaporean Malays share cultural, linguistic, and religious similarities with the majority of the populations in neighboring Indonesia and Malaysia, the latter being a nation to which Singapore was once a part. Existing in the shadow of Malay-Muslim homelands is a foundational source of unease for the Singapore state since it is controlled by non-Muslim, ethnic Chinese. Unsurprisingly, the state has consistently likened Singapore to Israel. When Singapore attained its independence in 1965, the state engaged the services of the Israeli Defense Forces to design and establish its compulsory military service. In his autobiography, first Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew described how the visiting Israeli delegates were disguised as Mexicans (since “they looked swarthy enough”) so as not to arouse the suspicions of Indonesia and Malaysia.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Martin van Bruinessen, ed., *Contemporary Developments in Indonesian Islam: Explaining the “Conservative Turn”* (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2013).

⁷⁷ See Boellstorff, *Gay Archipelago*, for analysis on Indonesia; and Peletz, *Gender Pluralism*, for Malaysia.

⁷⁸ Lee Kuan Yew, *From Third World to First: The Singapore Story—1965–2000* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000).

The state's concern regarding its status as a minority in the region has a direct bearing on its discipline over the Malay-Muslim minority. Through official statistics (which are compiled by the Singapore Department of Statistics according to ethnic and religious divisions), the state has constructed an image of Malays as backward, always needing guidance, and incapable of leadership and self-governance. In contrast to other ethnic and religious groups, Malay-Muslims are over-represented in undesirable indicators—high divorce rates, high rates of drug abuse, high incidents of obesity and diabetes, and so forth—while being underrepresented in desirable indicators—lowest numbers of university graduates, lowest average household income, et cetera. The state has proffered a cultural deficit theory to explain Malay underperformance: Malays are genetically inferior to the Chinese and cannot be expected to be as accomplished. In light of rising Malay birth-rates in the 1980s and a corresponding decline among the Chinese, the state encouraged immigration from Hong Kong to maintain Chinese numerical dominance so as to assure Singapore's continued economic success.⁷⁹

These assumptions about cultural differences owe a debt to colonial discourses on race that were central to how the British governed its Malay colony.⁸⁰ Images of lazy Malays played, for example, a crucial role in blocking Malay participation in the colonial economy; the British believed that Chinese migrants were more suitable for entrepreneurship given their industrious racial makeup. In her analysis of Malay educational performance in modern Singapore, Lily Zubaidah Rahim argues that the state policy of meritocracy is not as fair as it is often made out to be since Malays do not enjoy the same level of opportunities as do their counterparts due to the persistence of negative stereotypes.⁸¹

In more recent years, the state has continued to reproduce the cultural deficit theory as new representations of Malay-Muslims begin to surface. Like the Muslims in neighboring countries, Singaporean Malay-Muslims have experienced a revitalization of Islam since the 1980s. The everyday practices of Malay-Muslims have become more visibly orthodox by modernist Muslim standards, as seen, for instance, in the rising numbers of women wearing headscarves as well as demand for halal food, religious classes, and Islamic financial products. Malay-Muslims have also become more assertive about their religious rights. For state officials, the revitalization of Islam has added to the laundry list of problems that Malays cause. Suriani Suratman

⁷⁹ Michael Barr, "Lee Kuan Yew: Race, Culture and Genes," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 29, 2 (1999): 145–66.

⁸⁰ Syed Hussein Alatas, *The Myth of the Lazy Native* (London: F. Cass, 1977).

⁸¹ Lily Zubaidah Rahim, *The Singapore Dilemma: The Political and Educational Marginality of the Malay Community* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998). A similar argument is made by Tania Li, in *Malays in Singapore: Culture, Economy, and Ideology* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1989).

has documented numerous statements by Singapore's political leaders expressing concern that the increasingly pious Malay-Muslims were distancing themselves from other segments of the population.⁸² To her collection I would add what Lee Kuan Yew said in an interview: "I have to speak candidly to be of value, but I do not want to offend the Muslim community.... I think we were progressing very nicely until the surge of Islam came, and if you asked me for my observations, the other communities have easier integration—friends, inter-marriages and so on—than Muslims.... I would say, today, we can integrate all religions and races, except Islam."⁸³ The state's message was clear: Malay-Muslims are intent on sabotaging the nation, if not by their cultural inferiority then through their zealous religiosity. Integrating Malay-Muslims into the rest of the nation thus became the state's priority, through programs like the Inter-Racial Confidence Circles (established by the Goh Chok Tong administration in 2002) that purport to "bring together religious and community leaders to help build trust, understanding among races."⁸⁴

Malay-Muslim adoption of evangelical Christian homophobic discourses should be seen in the context of state disapproval of their supposed insularity. The rise of evangelicalism in Singapore, as discussed earlier, occurred concurrently with Islamic revitalization. Although the state has expressed concern over evangelicalism, it has avoided the condemnatory tone regularly employed regarding Malay-Muslims. A likely explanation for the state's reserve is that significant numbers of evangelicals are middle-class, university-educated Chinese; in other words, people who fit into the neoliberal state's conception of an ideal citizen. There are therefore several reasons why evangelical Christians would be useful allies for conservative Malay-Muslims. Aligning themselves with evangelicals enables them to communicate an aspiration to transcend a class status that has long been the subject of state contempt. More crucially, it allows Malay-Muslims to express their religious conservatism and anti-homosexual attitudes not as defenses of Islam or Malay culture, which would prove the state right about Malay-Muslim proclivity for social isolation, but rather as the embodiment of cross-religion and cross-ethnic concerns, which would allow Malay-Muslims to claim that they are good citizens who are well-integrated.

This is why Malay-Muslim homophobia is so laden with the rhetoric of solidarity. On the Facebook page started by supporters of Professor Aljunied, there are postings urging him to contact Pastor Lawrence Khong and organize a collaborative inter-religious effort against homosexuality. In its letter criticizing the Health Promotion Board, PERGAS declared their FAQs to be

⁸² Suriani Suratman, "'Problematic Singapore Malays': The Making of a Portrayal," *Occasional Papers*, no. 36 (Singapore: National University of Singapore, Department of Malay Studies, 2004).

⁸³ Lee Kuan Yew, *Hard Truths to Keep Singapore Going* (Singapore: Straits Times Press, 2011).

⁸⁴ "New Push to Strengthen Racial Ties," *Straits Times*, 30 Jan. 2002.

“insensitive towards the prevailing view of the *Singaporean society*. This is as reflected in the recent Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) survey which reported that 78.2 percent of Singaporeans views are generally conservative towards same-sex relation.” Likewise, in its letter supporting Professor Aljunied, the Fellowship of Muslim Students Association said, “*We stand together with the other individuals, religious and social organizations* that have expressed similar concerns of having such values to be accepted as legal way of life here” (my italics). Being homophobic allows Malay-Muslims to contest the state’s assertion that their piety is incompatible with patriotism.

Appealing to homophobia to repair the Malay-Muslim self-image presents higher stakes for men than for women. This is because state discourses depict Malay-Muslim males as being more threatening to the nation compared to their female counterparts. Women in headscarves are sometimes portrayed as detached from other communities, but Malay-Muslim men carry the weightier suspicion of sedition. There are many accounts of aspersion being cast on the loyalty of Malay-Muslim men, who during compulsory national service are denied strategic positions in the army and instead given non-frontline responsibilities with the police or civil defense forces.⁸⁵ Lee Kuan Yew seemed to affirm the existence of such discriminatory practices in a 1999 interview, saying, “If, for instance, you put in a Malay officer who’s very religious and who has family ties in Malaysia in charge of a machine gun unit, that’s a very tricky business.... If today the Prime Minister doesn’t think carefully about this, I and my family could have a tragedy.”⁸⁶ State suspicion of Malay-Muslim men escalated in the context of post-9/11 war on terror. In 2001–2002, intelligence forces arrested thirty-six men, mostly Malay-Muslim, for their involvement in the Al-Qaeda affiliated terror group, Jemaah Islamiyah.⁸⁷ While state leaders intensified their emphasis on social cohesion following those arrests, national newspapers have not ceased to publish on Jemaah Islamiyah till this day.⁸⁸ The image of Malay-Muslim men is thus continually denigrated by the specter of the terrorist, as illustrated by the much-publicized incident involving Mas Selamat. A member of Jemaah Islamiyah, Selamat was arrested in Indonesia in 2006 and subsequently extradited to Singapore. He escaped detention in 2008, fleeing to Malaysia in a drag disguise created using the headscarf and cosmetics, but was soon rearrested.⁸⁹ The case proved to be comedy gold

⁸⁵ Alon Peled, *A Question of Loyalty: Military Manpower Policy in Multiethnic States* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998); and Mutalib, *Singapore Malays*, 36.

⁸⁶ “Reality Is Race Bonds Exist—SM,” *Straits Times*, 19 Sept. 1999.

⁸⁷ Ministry of Home Affairs, “White Paper: The Jemaah Islamiyah Arrests and the Threat of Terrorism,” 7 Jan. 2003.

⁸⁸ A recent one is: “Undoing Brainwashing of JI ‘Holy Warriors,’” *Straits Times*, 15 Mar. 2014.

⁸⁹ Statement by Minister of Home Affairs, “Full Account of Mas Selamat’s Escape,” 22 Nov. 2010, <http://news.asiaone.com/News/Latest%2BNews/Relax/Story/A1Story20101122-248548.html> (accessed 27 May 2016).

for Internet users who produced and circulated digitally altered images of a feminized Selamat.

Is it surprising, given current representations of Malay-Muslim men, that a central motif in the recent homophobic turn has been to redefine proper Malay-Muslim masculinity? What constitutes proper masculinity is indeed implicit in vitriol toward homosexuals, whose stereotypes of butch lesbians and campy gay men are often construed as failed men.⁹⁰ In the case of Professor Aljunied, there was the added attempt by his supporters to depict him as the ideal representative of the Malay-Muslim male, as is evident in how they sought to defend not only his arguments but also his qualities. Professor Aljunied's academic pedigree is exceptional given that only 5 percent of Malay-Muslims have a university degree,⁹¹ which is why his supporters cited his profession as the reason he should be respected. In the counter-petition directed at the original complaint against Professor Aljunied, the petition writers took the complainants to task for their impertinence: "Instead of being respectful to educators, they chose to launch this untenable and unjustifiable assault on an educator."⁹² Similarly, another petition stated: "How can small children question academic giants like him?... [He] is an example to all Muslims and a hero whom we will unquestioningly worship and blindly obey, whose every word is our command."⁹³ In these accounts, the professor was made out to be an authoritative patriarch and a hero. In the latter petition (written by a man), Professor Aljunied's heroism was described in hyper-masculine terms that sound deeply homoerotic: "Handsome and manly he stands like a true intellectual, whose intellectual prowess is only matched with his strong manly presence."

But perhaps the most imaginative description of Professor Aljunied's heroic qualities is found in the Facebook page established by his supporters. There is a black-and-white photograph of the professor superimposed with a quotation from him, "History has taught us that the world will change by the hearts of the good, the faithful, and the courageous few,"⁹⁴ which has been juxtaposed with a black-and-white photograph and quotation by Malcolm X, "Early in life I had learned that if you want something, you had better make

⁹⁰ Don Kulick, "Humorless Lesbians," in Janet Holmes and Meredith Marra, eds., *Femininity, Feminism and Gendered Discourse: A Selected and Edited Collection of Papers from the Fifth International Language and Gender Association Conference (Igalas)* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), 59–81.

⁹¹ Singapore Department of Statistics, "Statistical Release 1: Demographic Characteristics, Education, Language and Religion," Census of Population, 2010.

⁹² Khairu Rejal, "Letter of Concern."

⁹³ Bilal Sokal, "The Petition to Protect Dr. Khairudin's Academic Freedom (Official)," *The Petition Site*, 2014, <http://www.thepetitionsite.com/460/896/761/the-petition-to-protect-dr-khairudins-academic-freedom-official/> (accessed 27 May 2016).

⁹⁴ Aljunied fan page, 28 Mar. 2014, <https://www.facebook.com/dr.syed.khairuddin.aljunied/photos/a.630789410307586.1073741833.629065100480017/640676729318854/?type=3&theater> (accessed 27 May 2016).

some noise.”⁹⁵ The attempt to compare Professor Aljunied’s struggles against homosexuality to Malcolm X’s struggles for racial equality may seem audacious, but its perversion should instruct us on the conundrums that Malay-Muslims have sought to resolve.

CONCLUSION

In recent years, there has been a great deal of discussion on the relationship between Islam and homosexuality. It is commonplace for commentaries originating from Euro-America to portray all Muslims as deeply homophobic and standing in stark contrast to the progressive gay politics of citizens of the West. One well-known proponent of such views was the gay, right-wing Dutch politician Pim Fortuyn. Citing Islam’s intolerance towards sexual minorities, as well as other affronts toward Dutch liberties (such as kissing in public), as reasons for why Muslim immigration to the Netherlands should be curbed, Fortuyn was influential in recent anti-Muslim Dutch politics.⁹⁶ But such denunciations of Islam’s supposed homophobia tend to be less about championing gay and lesbian rights than about the disciplining of Muslims. Observing the United States, gender studies scholar Jasbir Puar describes how gay and lesbian organizations staged massive protests when Iran publicly executed two gay teenagers in 2005, but were silent following the 2004 publication of the torture photographs at Abu Ghraib prison in which the homophobia of the U.S. military was on full display. Although there is systemic prejudice against homosexuals in the United States, Puar argues that the contemporary war on terror has enabled homosexuals to perform American patriotism by vilifying the “homophobic” Muslims and thus sustaining the Islamophobic discourse that fuels the war on terror.⁹⁷

Recent events in Singapore show that Muslim homophobia has complex roots and explanations. Non-normative genders and sexualities have long thrived in Southeast Asia, even among its Muslim communities. Scriptural interpretations of the story of Lot are multiple. Although the homophobic turn of the past few years was justified by Islam’s holy texts, it is crucial to note that such understandings gained traction within a particular constellation of contemporary politics. I have discussed how the anti-homosexuality biases of British

⁹⁵ Aljunied fan page, 26 Mar. 2014, <https://www.facebook.com/dr.syed.khairuddin.aljunied/photos/a.630942323625628.1073741834.629065100480017/639929992726861/?type=3&theater> (accessed 27 May 2016).

⁹⁶ To summarize a complex case, Fortuyn was assassinated in 2002 in the midst of a political campaign for the Dutch national elections. Volkert van der Graff, an animal rights activist who was eventually convicted for the murder, claimed to have killed Fortuyn in order to prevent him from exploiting Muslims and other disenfranchised social groups for political gain. See, for example, Ian Buruma, *Murder in Amsterdam: The Death of Theo Van Gogh and the Limits of Tolerance* (New York: Penguin, 2006).

⁹⁷ Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

colonialism (Section 377A), its reproduction by the postcolonial state (“Asian Values”), and neoliberal policies (allowing a self-governing public to debate homosexuality) all worked to lay the foundation for Muslim homophobia. Importantly, Muslim homophobia was influenced by evangelical Christian activism against homosexuality. The effect of evangelicalism on other religions certainly requires more investigation, particularly in African nations where conservative Protestants and Muslims are spearheading the prosecution (and persecution) of homosexuals. In Singapore, Muslim reproduction of evangelical Christian discourse was a result of anxieties from being an underprivileged group whose patriotism was constantly questioned by the state. Standing alongside evangelicals against homosexuality enables Singaporean Muslims to perform good citizenship, even as they seek to overcome their minority status by trampling on another minority. These overlapping desires and ethical systems suggest that we will never be able to fully understand Muslim homophobia if we attributed it only to Islam.

Abstract: This article examines the recent emergence of homophobia among Muslims in Singapore. While Islamic scriptures were used to justify homophobia, interpretations of these holy texts regarding non-normative sexualities have always been diverse. The anti-homosexuality exegesis of Islamic scriptures gained traction in a particular constellation of contemporary politics. When the state broached a discussion over whether a colonial-era law criminalizing homosexuality should be repealed, evangelical Christians were the first to vigorously support the retention of the law. Evangelical Christian homophobic discourses were soon reproduced by Muslims, whose own conservatism has been rising in recent years. Longstanding state biases against Muslims (who are mostly lower-working-class Malays), however, restricted the expression of their religious conservatism, which makes it useful for them to perform good citizenship by standing alongside evangelical Christians (mostly middle-class Chinese). This article demonstrates that Muslim homophobia has complex roots and explanations that cannot be reduced solely to Islam.