

9 Religions

Introduction

First of all

It is widely believed that all religions are against homosexuality. Although the texts of some confessions seem to condemn homosexuality, in practice it is mainly fundamentalist and other traditionalist believers who are the most intransigent opponents of homosexuality.

Many religious texts denounce specific forms of male homosexual behaviour. Lesbian behaviour, however, is seldom mentioned. This is linked to the de-sexualisation of lesbians which is part of the specific prejudice against female homosexuality (according to the sexist notion that “what women do doesn’t matter”!!). Gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transsexuals often have problems with their Church or with their religious beliefs as they become adults. However, many maintain their religious beliefs although they stop participating in official and community practices, due to the institutional hierarchy’s verbal and practical discrimination.



Basic information

The attitude of the Christian Churches towards homosexuality

In its official statements, the Roman Catholic Church condemns homosexuality. According to the Church, homosexual acts contradict the true meaning of sexuality, i.e. procreation. On this point, Catholic moral is still strongly influenced by a notion of nature and “natural” that has been fully developed in the 19th century.

The current Catechism of the Catholic Church states that there is a predisposition to homosexuality that is not changeable. From this point of view, one is supposed to consider people who have this “disordered disposition” with “respect and sensitivity”. However, homosexual behaviour per se is still condemned as a serious sin. Homosexuals should – “perhaps also by means of a selfless (i.e. not sexual) friendship” – live in sexual abstinence.

In the past years, some Protestant Churches in Western and Northern Europe started a debate on the question of dealing with and pastoral care for LGBT persons. Some sectors of the Protestant Church (including one American branch of the Church of England) are very open and allow the appointment of gay and lesbian ministers and the blessings of same-sex unions.

However, there are also so-called Evangelical Free Churches and parishes that take a strictly conservative position similar to that of the Roman Catholic Church.

In both the Catholic and the Protestant confessions, there are always individuals, groups or theological orientations that do not agree with official positions and statements and have a more conservative or a more liberal approach (e.g. liberation theology). Therefore, one should therefore be very careful in judging a Church and the diversity within the institution should be taken into account.

The attitude towards homosexuality in Judaism

In Judaism, as within Christian religions, there is a big divide between Orthodox and liberal movements on homosexuality. Orthodox Judaism generally prohibits homosexuality, on the basis of the condemnation seemingly expressed in Leviticus 18:22 and in the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. However, it is unclear whether this ban applies to homosexuality as such: some commentators have argued that the ban concerned only prostitution, rape, or sexual intercourse with both men and women at the same time. Some American and Israeli Jews have contested, even within Orthodox movements, the official interpretation of the abovementioned texts.

Reform synagogues are generally more open about homosexuality and some European Reform rabbis now officiate at same-sex union ceremonies (some are even openly gay or lesbian themselves).

The attitude of Islam towards homosexuality

Although Islamic law condemns homosexuality, there are many allusions to male homoeroticism in Islamic literature. Same-sex body contact (holding hands and kissing in public), often misunderstood by foreigners as a sign of homosexual orientation, is a common behaviour and more likely a result of gender segregation that leads people to turn to one’s own gender when the other cannot be reached very easily. Because of stronger social restrictions, women rarely talk about sexuality in public and there are very few historical sources about female sexuality.

Orthodox Islamic views on homosexuality are mostly negative. They openly condemn it and contain threatening statements against this “great sin” that must be punished. However, the Koran can also be interpreted in a more liberal way. Based on the sacred text, the condemnation of homosexual love, as it is currently promoted, cannot be justified.

The Hadith, instead, have a more open stance toward homosexuality. They are a collection of stories, of which only some are ascribable to Mohammed.

Islamic law (Sharia) raises an important issue. Most Islamic schools of law provide the death penalty for anal intercourse between men (liwat). Islamic legislation, at least the Criminal Code, does not necessarily have a religious value for Muslims, because it was written by men and not by God. This argument may help some Muslim gays and lesbians to reconcile their sexual orientation with their religious beliefs.

Hinduism

Indian culture is marked by strong social divisions. Social behaviour is defined by what one may and must do within the limits his/her own caste. Practically no one is allowed to deviate from the norm. A patriarchal and heterosexist order is predominant in all social classes and castes, although this order is being slowly eroded in urban centres. Even in the Kama Sutra, the ancient Indian text on human sexual behaviour, homosexual practices are clearly ranked lower than heterosexual ones. It should be pointed out that the dominant current of Hinduism assigns sexuality to the realm of Maya, i.e. to the world of appearances and illusions, and therefore it is of lesser value. Tantrism, however, offers different perspectives.

Buddhism

The main aim of Buddhism is to free people from dependence. The less one has sex, the less one depends on the world, and therefore the freer one is to discover one's inner truth. But this path to the true self is based on individual choice. The only prescriptions concerning sex are exclusively directed towards monks, and not to others. The main recommendation, the basic ethic principle is that one should not harm others and this applies to sexuality as well.

In the Pali Canon, the sacred Buddhist text, homosexuality between monks is condemned, but is not thematised per se.

What does this mean for me?

Religion is an important aspect of a person's value system and cultural background. Usually, religious identity is already formed before people become aware of their sexual orientation. Therefore, faith is a core aspect of personality.

Religious spokespersons sometimes give one-sided views of religion and of the meaning of sacred texts – also on sexuality – and this contributes to create social and internalised homophobia. A possible counter-argument is represented by the fact that constitutionally guaranteed human rights include the right to freely and fully develop one's personality, including therefore sexual orientation.

In health and psychophysical well-being counselling and at school (or more generally in education), it is important to present the different points of view and explore what religion means to young people on a personal level.

It is always useful to help someone develop a clearer understanding of their feelings. Especially when teens live in environments that morally condemn homosexuality, they need to be supported and counselled in acknowledging their needs and distinguishing strictly religious views from social and cultural norms. If they take a position which condemns homosexuality, it is important to remind them that respect towards diversity is a key human virtue which is the cornerstone of a civilised society. Try to understand how to deal with the different points of view about norms and values, help teens develop their own ethical code and not only abide to the rules imposed by others.

Education

(Teachers)

Bear in mind

Faith takes many different forms of religious belief. In all religions there are fundamentalists who believe the holy texts present precise instructions for a living a righteous life in all times. Conversely, others take into account the fact that those texts reflect the ideas, opinions and moral judgements of the times in which they were written. More liberal groups place greater emphasis on personal responsibility for the definition of “proper” and “improper” behaviour. Such diversity of views is reflected in the variety of approaches to the teaching of each religion. Fundamentalists (and “conservatives” in general) tend to teach religion in a dogmatic way that excludes personal interpretation and any type of adjustment to changing cultural and social conditions. More liberal groups accept the principle of personal freedom and responsibility and, at times, they even criticize the role of priests, ministers, rabbis and imams who believe they have the right/duty to tell others what is right and what is wrong. Most people try find their own way between such extremes, one that values the rules of the holy texts, as well as cultural-religious norms, while at the same time also taking personal orientations into consideration.

Where would you place yourself on this continuum? Where do you think your students would place themselves? What does this imply for your relationship with teens? What is your view of homosexuality? How do you behave with students who don't agree with you on such issues?

Note that in many religions, believers have different opinions on many moral questions (e.g. on war and peace, on environmental protection, on the treatment of refugees, etc.), even within more traditionalist groups. Usually, when dealing with these topics, people show different degrees of acceptance of the opinions of others. Why, then, is there less acceptance when the different views have to do with sexuality?

Education - FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions)

Please also refer to the FAQs for the psycho/social/healthcare professionals.

What does the Bible say about homosexuality?

The answer to this question depends on the interpretation of the Bible and on the way one understands it. Two interpretations of the Bible have become popular over time. The first takes into account the historical, cultural and religious context in which the Bible was written. Not all the prohibitions and rules of the Holy Scriptures are considered as relevant today: for instance, the prohibition to wear clothes made of mixed fibres (Lev 19:19) or various rules requiring animal sacrifices. This shows that societal evolution influences and overcomes the rigid interpretations of sacred texts. Conversely, orthodox interpretation takes every verse of the Bible “literally” and requires faithful compliance, regardless of social change, what is important is that the interpretation matches traditional ideology and helps strengthen a conservative perception of the world.

Beyond interpretation traditions, it must be said that in principle it is problematic to look for clues on these topics in the Bible because the word “homosexuality” and its meaning date from modern times. When the Bible was written, the sexual identity theoretical construct did not exist, whereas today it is the central premise of any discussion on homosexuality.

What does the Koran say about homosexuality?

Contrarily to common belief, the Koran is not a “book of laws”. In this “holy book” there is no mention of “homosexuality” and also no word for men or women who feel attraction for or have sex with persons of their own gender. However, many Muslim scholars and laymen are convinced that the Koran clearly condemns and forbids homosexuality. In order to prove this point, the story of Lot (Arabic: Lût) and his people is often quoted (this story also appears in the Bible, namely as the story of Sodom), but this story condemns insult, rape, injustice and the violation of the right to hospitality, and not anal intercourse that is automatically associated with homosexuality. The theme of the story is not sexuality or homosexuality, nor is it love and relationships. Hence, this story cannot be used to condemn homosexuality.

Anyway, the Koran does not explicitly mention sex or homosexuality, pederasty or anal intercourse. The men accused are married and can not be compared to gays and lesbians, as we understand them today.

How should I deal with religious prejudice in my class?

Explain that there is a great variety of religions, each including a wide variety of beliefs and attitudes ranging from orthodox to less conservative liberal beliefs, with liberal and fundamentalists ones being at the two extreme ends. Start a group discussion on diversity. Promote a mutually respectful behaviour between students and encourage self-reflection and dialogue.

Education - Tools

A letter to Christina

Aim: initiating a discussion about the relationship between homosexuality and the Catholic Church (for instance) and promoting empathy.

Method: tell the students the following story. "Christina is Catholic and deeply religious. At the same time, she feels very attracted to women. Recently she fell in love with Charlotte and now she has no more doubts about her feelings. But she finds it very difficult to combine these feelings with her religion and fears the reaction of her parents and of her friends.

At this point have the students write a letter to Christina where they will try to freely express their ideas and emotions.

Then go on with the story telling that Christina wrote an anonymous letter to the Question & Answer column of a national magazine: "My parents and my own Church condemn lesbian relationships. But I read that in some Protestant Churches, lesbians can marry. I am confused. Who is right? And what should I do?"

Now, ask the students to write another letter and to try to imagine they are offering Christina help and new ideas. Open a debate on the opinions and feelings brought by this exercise.

Please note: the students will probably come up with several different types of advice for Christina, ranging from denial to acceptance of her feelings. Focus on the students' letters. Discuss their opinions about the relation between religion and cultural and social intolerance. This exercise will work best in multi-religious groups.

Accepting others

Aim: to encourage mutual respect and acceptance in a religious context.

Method: start by explaining to the students that the concept of "nei-

ghbourly love” is important in all world religions. Ask them first if they share this value. If they do, invite them to discuss how to apply this concept to gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transexuals.

Please note: it is advisable to know the arguments and counter-arguments students may use in the discussion (for instance, loving your neighbour can imply not letting your neighbour commit sins; in this case, you could reply that caring for your neighbour should not limit her/his freedom of choice). Do not allow the discussion to be limited to religious texts or rules. Focus instead on the spiritual and loving aspects of religion.

It is important to treat students with equity in this discussion and to take care to avoid ‘preaching tolerance’.

It may happen that students will recognize the importance of respecting and accepting others, in principle, while at the same time still having negative feelings towards homosexuality. In that case, accept their feelings and explore how they deal with them.

The “Cure”

Aim: to explore the myth that homosexuality can be “cured”.

Method: start by telling the students that some fundamentalist Christians think that homosexuality is a mental disorder that can be “cured”. Ask them what they think of this idea. Have them look up this topic on the Internet and search for information about alleged “therapies” for homosexuality and ask them to write a paper describing their findings (if you use the search terms “homosexuality” and “remediation” on the Internet, you will find a series of recent debates on this issue).

Please note: use this exercise keeping in mind you run the risk of exposing students to anti-gay propaganda. Provide students with correct information on the so-called “cures” for homosexuality, clarifying that it is not possible to steer the sexual, emotional and romantic orientation of a LGBT person towards heterosexuality/bisexuality.

A STORY...



<Teresa> Are we talking about religion today?

<Aaron> Yes, that's the topic.

<Almira> I think it's great that you've chosen this topic!

<Julie> Before we start – and also because it's part of the topic: which of you wants to go to the next Europride?

<Koray> If you tell us what it's about, I could think about it ...

<Julie> Gays and lesbians from all over Europe meet within the framework of the Gay Pride Parade and organise an intercultural week on different subjects. One of them could be religion, I think. But I don't want to go there without you.

<Koray> You mean that we would prepare a topic and then organise a cultural event together there?

<Julie> That's right.

<Aaron> Through the Internet, without knowing each other?

<Almira> I don't have the feeling that I don't know you. Think about Elsa and Chloé – at the end they met through the chat.

<Aaron> Right, I'm in. So, who starts ?

<Kristin> I come from a very religious Christian family. I think that's why I never found the courage to tell my parents that I am a lesbian.

<Koray> What would happen?

<Kristin> I have no idea. Strict Christians refuse homosexuality.

<Julie> My parents feel that God must have had a reason when He created homosexuality. They think that everything has been created by God and so they fairly accept it.

<Kristin> Ok, but God has also allowed evil, my parents would say. Adultery for instance is forbidden, and so is murder.

<Julie> In any case homosexuality is not prohibited by the Ten Commandments.

<Kristin> I will have to talk about it at the HuK. Good argument, Julie!

<Aaron> What is the HuK?

<Kristin> The organisation Homosexuelle und Kirche (Homosexuals and the Church). I have been there a few times. They are nice people. They fight for equal rights. They argue for instance, that Jesus never specifically said anything about homosexuality. Neither in a positive nor in a negative sense. They also say that, for example, Saint Paul could not have spoken about homosexuality because the concept of homosexuality appeared only in the 19th century. In any case, they support the freedom of choice. ;-)

<Koray> Sounds reasonable.

<Kristin> Sure, but strict Christians interpret it in a different way, of course.

<Koray> Also my parents don't know that I'm gay – but for me it's not really important and then I have other problems that are a lot worse.

<Aaron> And do they have anything to do with religion?

<Koray> It's more about the behaviour of non-Muslim homosexuals towards us Muslim homosexuals and also with the whole Muslim world's reaction towards homosexuality.

<Aaron> Does that mean that you don't belong to neither of these groups?

<Koray> Yes, that's the way I see it. Just imagine, you meet a non-Muslim gay man and tell him that you are a Muslim. He'd be baffled and would reply "That can't be: either you're gay or you're Muslim".

<Kristin> Why?

<Koray> I'm afraid it's the same all over the world. In Austria, in any case, I am first and foremost a foreigner, who could never be gay anyway. That's the way many people see it in the gay community. If I add, on top of it, that I'm Muslim, that's it: no gay man will ever look at me.

<Aaron> Yes, I can understand that. There are awful stereotypes everywhere, even in the gay and lesbian community, right?

<Koray> I don't know how it is with you Jewish people. With Christians, at any rate,

I have the impression that the family isn't all that important. That's why for most Christians coming out isn't as difficult. But my family is really very important to me and I am important to them. The social ties are simply too strong and important for us all, especially because we grow up in a host culture and I think that this is the way it should be: families should always stick together.

<Aaron> Koray: Never underestimate a Yiddish mother ;-). We'll talk about it later. What do you want to do about it?

<Koray> I think that my family is more important than the nicest gay community (but please don't take it personally). I'll probably get married and still keep my partners. Tell us, Aaron, what happens with your Yiddish mother?

<Aaron> Yiddish mothers are hard to ignore. There is this syndrome of over-protection. They always want the absolute best for their children. It's hard to contradict her. But back to you once again, Koray, is there no Muslim gay group near you? Surely you're not the only one!

<Koray> No, of course I'm not the only one. But I think there is no such organisation here.

<Aaron> A friend in Germany told me that he's an activist in the Türk-Gay group – check it out on the Internet – they have their own website.

<Koray> Good idea, thanks.

<Almira> I'm also Muslim, but I am a Bosnian Muslim. In Kosovo, where I am to be deported, I would probably have to wear a headscarf and get married. Being homosexual there can even mean death.

<Koray> Oh dear, then you'd better stay here, don't you think?

<Almira> Yes, I think so. My parents know now that I'm a lesbian. At first I too was convinced that they would disown me forever, but they didn't, Koray. Maybe your fear is a bit exaggerated?

<Koray> I'll talk to these people from the "Türk-Gay" group and I will keep you posted, okay?

<Julie> Okay, Koray. Will you go to the Europride next year?

<Koray> I'm working on it, Aaron, now you tell us something, it's your turn.

<Aaron> I'll tell my parents and I also think that they'll understand. For me it's important to be able to trust them, and for them to trust me. Keeping it a secret would have terrible consequences in the long run. Neither one of them would ever want that. And about being Jewish, it is not a matter of nationality. Just to be clear. Some in our gay/lesbian group are religious, others not. But we're still Jewish, because our parents are Jewish.

<Kristin> Would you like to say something about homosexuality and faith, anyway?

<Aaron> Of course. Orthodox people of any religion are against homosexuality, I think. The three monotheist religions do not differ at all. But in the Jewish world there is a very strong liberal/progressive current, which involves about 60%, or perhaps more of all Jews.

I suppose it's the same for Christians, and I hope that there is a similar evolution in Islam. But I'm no great expert on the other religions, as I said earlier on, so I think it would be better if the others said something about that, because I can only talk about what happens in Judaism, okay?

<Kristin> Sure, I would like to focus on liberal Christian movements, may I? I've also read something about liberal Muslim movements. Many Muslim feminists are fighting for liberal values.

<Aaron> Thank you, Kristin. Apart from the fact that men and women have equal rights in liberal Judaism, there is also a great openness with respect to homosexuality. In New York for instance, there are LGBT communities with 3,000 members.

<Julie> Wow, that's great!

<Aaron> Yes, and in London there is a College in which are trained only those men and women Rabbis who do not have any problems with homosexuality. They undergo a very rigorous selection process before being admitted.

<Almira> Sounds wonderful. Will you tell us about it at our big event at the next Europride?

<Aaron> I'd love to, I'll be there.



Counselling

(Psycho/social/healthcare professionals)

Bear in mind

Physical health

Some people think that psycho/social/healthcare professionals should be able to distance themselves from their own religious convictions. What do you think? Is this 'objectivity' possible for you?

If they tacitly condemns the moral position of a person that came to them, how will this affect their ability to listen to that person? To what extent do you think your religious convictions influence your behaviour towards those who come to you for support? For instance, do you think it is possible or acceptable to advise someone to totally abstain from sexual relations?

If you are a physician, you are certainly seen as an authority figure and you may have a strong psychological impact on a young person. Even though you may think this is not very relevant because you are mainly focused on physical health, your influence is probably greater than you think. Consider, for instance, how you react to questions on safe sex in general and, in particular, with gays and lesbians. It is important for you to be aware of your own religious background and of how religion influences our own morality, even if you are "just" taking care of the physical health of people.

Mental health

As we grow up, religion becomes part of our moral code; its role is to help us distinguish between what we should and shouldn't do. When religious topics emerge during a counselling session, it is of the utmost importance for counsellors to acknowledge their own religious convictions; attempts to appear "neutral" can complicate the interaction between the counsellor and the person he/she is working with.

However, the counsellor should ensure that their personal religious beliefs won't have a negative influence on the counselling process. For instance, if someone's conflicts with their homosexuality derive from their religious convictions, and if these are (consciously or unconsciously) echoed by the counsellor's own beliefs, this could cause damage to that person's mental health. Are you able to recognise your own religious convictions? What moral codes are important to you? What role do these codes play in your profession?

Every counsellor carries his/her own set of norms and cultural expectations. In the course of the session, conflicts on cultural or religious values may arise and the counsellor may decide that it's useful to discuss them openly. Do you recognise possible unresolved inner conflicts you may have concerning your own religion? How do you deal with them in your sessions? How do you deal with a person whose religion differs from yours? In which situations do you think it is better to continue working with someone who may be difficult to coach, and when is it better to refer them to a colleague of the same religion or who is not influenced by his personal religious beliefs?



Counselling - FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions)

Please also refer to the FAQs for the education sector.

How should I behave if the religion of the LGBT person who asked for my professional help prohibits homosexual acts?

It is very important to understand the place that religion occupies in the life of that person in order to understand whether it is possible for him/her to distance him/herself from traditionally prescribed behaviour patterns. A solid therapeutic alliance is required when working on conflicts relating to homosexuality/bisexuality/transsexuality. A counsellor needs to understand how many conflicts originate from religious prohibitions and/or from parental and cultural expectations. Discuss with the person what it means for him/her to take sacred texts literally.

My religious beliefs condemn homosexuality. Do I have an obligation to counsel a gay or a lesbian person?

In therapy, religious convictions will come into play, as do all aspects of a counsellor's personal background. Counsellors who disapprove of homosexuality or homosexual behaviour because of their religious beliefs should probably abstain from treating LGBT persons and refer them to a colleague. Therefore, it is essential for counsellors to be aware of their stance on homosexuality and of the responsibilities imposed upon them by their profession.

Is it possible to practice your religion and to live openly as a homosexual/bisexual/transsexual at the same time?

Yes, it is. Many gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transsexuals are able to balance their private life and their religion. Some have even joined particularly progressive Churches or groups (this is especially true for some Protestant and Jewish denominations). Sometimes these Churches bless gay and lesbian marriages, perform commitment ceremonies and have openly homosexual ministers or rabbis. There are also secular gay and lesbian organisations that deal with the theme of the conflicts between homosexuality and religion.

Counselling - Tools

The Spiritual Guide

Aim: understanding the importance of religion in the life of the person you are counselling and identifying the problems it entails with reference to the topic.

Method: ask the person to imagine a situation in which, together with a friend, they meet a priest, rabbi, imam or a spiritual guide. Give him/her some time to imagine the situation and then ask him/her talk about it. What happens during the meeting? If the person is not able to imagine such a situation, then he/she could imagine a close friend asking him/her key questions about his/her life or needs.

Please note: this exercise can be used in group, as well as in individual counselling sessions. Be aware that, for some people, the image of a religious authority may evoke rather negative feelings. Let the person choose a figure who he/she perceives as a true spiritual guide.

Balancing Sex and Religion

Aim: to explore the role religion plays in the life of the person you are counselling. The exercise should help him/her to establish a personal balance between the expression of his/her sexuality and the profession of his/her religion and values.

Method: ask the person to talk about the place religion has in his/her life. Next, examine together the attitudes of relevant present and past religious figures towards homosexuality.

Discuss the historical and cultural relativism of religion as a combination of spiritual and social aspects, as well as a means of social control. Try to understand if religion is an important aspect of that person's identity. If that is the case, suggest he/she to get in touch with homosexual religious groups (if possible). This may help the person find a support network and a group with which he/she can identify.

Please note: this exercise can be used in group, as well as in individual counselling sessions. In a group session, "religion" can be dealt with and discussed as a central theme if it is an important issue for all the participants. This does not mean that everybody should have a religious belief, as atheists could also be interested in discussing this topic. In this discussion, it is crucial to distinguish between religious norms and spirituality. Norms usually address the relationships between persons, spirituality refers to the personal relationship with the Divine. In cases where religious norms are very uncompromising on homosexuality, emphasis should be placed on the personal relationship with the Divine, without taking away the hope of changing the norms.

Role-Playing: Dialogue Between a Cleric and a young LGBT

Aim: to address the conflict between religion and homosexuality, bisexuality and transsexuality.

Method: one person plays the role of a young lesbian woman and another plays the role of a cleric (i.e. a Catholic priest). The girl wants to talk about the conflicts she is facing and ask him for spiritual guidance (naturally, other possible roles are the young homosexual, bisexual or transsexual person). The rest of the group observes the scene. Anyone who wishes to play a part can do it. When the discussion between the girl and the priest seems to offer no new points of view, ask the components of the group to talk about their impressions and how they felt as actors and as spectators.

Please note: if people are hesitant to play the role of the young LGBT, play that part yourself first. It will help if you play the part in a somewhat 'inadequate' manner; this may encourage others to improve on your performance.