



THE ENGLISH COMPLEMENT
Installment 3

HALAL THIS WAY

TOWARDS
A VIABLE QUEERING
IN SUNNI ISLAM

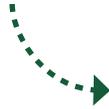
a foundational thesis by

MAHER ALHAJ

THE ENGLISH COMPLEMENT

Installment 3: Chapter 1.2

HALAL THIS WAY



TOWARDS
A VIABLE QUEERING
IN SUNNI ISLAM

a foundational thesis by

MAHER ALHAJ

Copyright © 2022 Maher Alhaj

All rights reserved.

This online document is available to read and/or download for free to individuals on www.halalthisway.org. This is a service provided by the publisher at the discretion of the author. However, no part of this work may be reproduced and/or used in any other manner, in the USA and/or globally, without the prior written permission of the copyright owner (except for *fair use* as understood by the legal doctrine of *fair use* in the copyright law of the United States of America).

To request permissions, and/or for general inquiries, contact the publisher at inquiry@halalthisway.org.

ISBN (eBook, PDF, Website Installment Edition): 979-8-9854539-8-0

The text for the cover was set in Gotham.
The text for this book was set in Freight Text Pro.

Halal This Way, LLC
Chicago, IL, USA
www.halalthisway.org



Halal This Way® is a registered Trademark/Service Mark
of the publisher, Halal This Way, LLC.

PART 1

On Convening the Problem



CHAPTER SYNOPSIS

1.2 *On Warranted Concerns as Pre-Modern, Modern, and Post-Modern*

A PART OF THE “PROBLEM” that complicates the queer predicament of Sunni Arab spaces at this moment in time is that it is entangled with many longstanding concerns and presuppositions regarding what queerness is and/or should be. This chapter developed in response to the fact that the queer predicament is often viewed by the dominant secular narrative in simplistic terms (which demand simplistic solutions). For instance, the view that Queer folks are born this way, and all Arabs and Muslims need to do is catch up with the rest of the “modern” world, progress, have democracies, follow science, and so on. I deal with many of these concerns and presuppositions (and how we may go about their solutions) through a critical lens throughout this thesis, but the purpose of this chapter is to simply bring attention to (i.e., “convene”) the complications that form the context upon which my theoretical work is built.

[Manifest Problem/s] We are “modern” people, and/or we belong to the “modern” age. As such, we simply cannot accept the injustices and violence being committed against Queer folks anywhere. The matter is simple: Queerness is an inborn phenomenon, our “scientific” knowledge “confirms” it, and our political systems must protect and uphold justice for Queer people everywhere. Queer rights are *human* rights, and therefore, *regions* and *religions* of the world need to catch up with “modernity”, “science”, and/or “progress”.

[Destabilization/s] While there is a lot of truth about the need for justice for Queer folks everywhere, our understanding of queerness and our demands of justice are often driven by a dominant narrative of modernity (which assumes modernity in itself to be a single and universal concept), as well as by certain notions of “progress” (which assumes that any

progress that matters is tied to an understanding of modernity that is Western, secular, human-centric, gets better with time, and applies to all). But do we only have one “modernity”? Must it be secular and/or Western? Can progress mean different things to different kinds of people? Can our understanding of science ever truly be objective? Should the world be subjugated to the mighty force of one dominant political system that dictates what queerness should mean for everyone, everywhere? Is the matter of queerness really all that simple?

[Critical Problem/s and Consequence/s] To assume that there is one “modernity”, and it is necessarily *Western* and *secular* in nature, and to universalize and impose such understandings onto the rest of the world, is in itself an injustice (for it ignores the contributions of other world civilizations to human advancements that are not secular and/or Western). Furthermore, this kind of understanding ignores critical human differences (e.g., non-secular and/or Western, and that we are different kinds of people), which have contributed to our collective human advancements throughout time, place, and context. Enforcing “secular modernity” as the solution to the queer predicament everywhere (which includes spaces within the “Western” world) is also myopic (and becomes implicated with systems of oppression), for it is also often not true to queer causes, and Queer people themselves (among other things), in spaces that defy secularism and/or Western modernity (for it undervalues the role of religion and other formative ways of being in the world as integral components of what makes us human, ways that do not live up to the secular definition of what it is to be “modern”).

[The Message/s] The queer predicament is anything but simple. There are various concerns with underlying legitimizing mechanisms (“the reasons” behind our concerns, which I refer to as “warrants” in this chapter) that contribute to what complicates the queer predicament in Sunni Arab spaces (among other predicaments and other spaces). All of these concerns and warrants demand attention and cannot simply be “solved”

by Western “modernity” and/or an overarching secular approach that claims simplicity and/or (dis)regards “the Other” as antiquated (when “the Other” is not secular and/or Western). As human collectives, we have a historical pluralism of “modern” periods (measured by the rise of various civilizations in the past) that have contributed to our collective advancement and understandings as a species throughout time, space, and context. As such, our presuppositions and/or warrants about the queer predicament as a historical concern are not just a product of the day or limited to Western conceptualizations but come at the conversation from various times, places, and contexts. A wholesome solution to the queer predicament in Sunni Arab spaces (and beyond it) must eventually tend to all of them.

I divide the concerns and warrants that are relevant to the queer predicament of Sunni Arab spaces at this moment in time into three categories: “religious” when they primarily deal with religion, “political” when they primarily deal with politics, and “scientific” when they primarily deal with “science”. Of course, there is concern about the role of “religion” itself in the currently dominating secular sphere and whether religion can be at all “relevant” as a part of the conversation. Some of the religious concerns that complicate the queer predicament in Sunni Arab spaces, in particular, include what is called a “crisis of authority” in contemporary Islam, as in who do Muslims turn to when re-evaluating queerness (i.e., Muslims have “lost” a centralized authority and power structure and are forced to operate within a largely secular space). There are also the concerns about God’s Will which seems to reject the existence of queerness as anything but sinful and/or forbidden, the “Westernization” of Islam in what came to be labeled as “Progressive Islam” (which seems to further dehumanize Islam and Muslims), the concerns about relinquishing the tradition in favor of “modernity”, and so on.

Then there are also the concerns about the role of Western politics as a dominating force. Some of the political concerns and warrants that complicate the queer predicament in Sunni Arab spaces have to do with our perceptions of modernity, progress, and universalizing them, which

undervalues human differences and assumes that the Western model of dealing with Queer folks is viable for all. In turn, this Western model as a concern contributes to what is known as the “Clash of Civilization” (because the West considers Muslims as “anti” all sorts of progress, for progress must be secular and Western). There are also the political concerns that have to do with Queer rights as human rights, what is known as “identity politics”, and the like, which further exacerbates the tensions between the “West” and “Islam”, especially when the West demands and imposes itself.

Finally, there are also concerns about science itself, its weaponization as a tool in the conversation (to support various religious and/or political claims), and whether scientific “knowledge” can be objective at all. Some of the scientific concerns entangled with the queer predicament of Sunni Arab spaces (and others) deal with whether it is possible to “know” for certain what results in queerness as a phenomenon (and whether that matters at all). The concerns have manifested in various debates labeled differently based on the context in which they are debated, such as the debates about whether queerness is a product of “nature” or “nurture”, an “inborn” phenomenon or “acquired”, a stable “identity” or “fluid” and/or “performative”, an “essential” trait and/or “constructed”, and so on (all of which are deployed in service to whether queerness “should” be “normalized” and/or otherwise).

CHAPTER 1.2

On Warranted Concerns as Pre-Modern, Modern, and Post-Modern

OUT OF OUR COMMITMENT TO the 'amānah (endowment of trust, integrity, responsibility, and so on)¹⁰³ of the topic, with which many of us have been charged, I must take time to raise some of the *concerns* and some of their underlying *warrants*¹⁰⁴ that have led to (and complicated) the contemporary queer predicament in Sunni Arab spaces¹⁰⁵.

103 I use the Arabic word 'amānah here as a primary word rather than a translation because it carries a heavier weight in Arabic. It references a verse in the Quran about the heavy responsibility humans took on when they agreed to be entrusted on the Earth, to be just, act in accordance with God's Will, and to do so responsibly: "Indeed, We offered the trust to the heavens and the earth and the mountains, but they 'all' declined to bear it, being fearful of it. But humanity [humans] assumed it, 'for' they are truly wrongful 'to themselves' and ignorant 'of the consequences'" [33:72]; see Mustafa Khattab, trans., "Sūrah 33, Al-'Aḥzāb, Ayah 72", accessed July 13, 2021, find the URL in the bibliography. My use of the word 'amānah is more general, but I want to emphasize the heaviness of the responsibility this work requires.

104 A warrant, as in an "act of authorization", which contributes to "justifying reason or ground for an action, belief, or feeling"; see "Warrant, (n. 1)", in *OED Online* (Oxford University Press), accessed June 4, 2020, find the URL in the bibliography. That is, a "warrant" as in the legitimizing mechanism allowing us to justify our actions, respond to our concerns, attempt to "solve" them, and so on.

105 A predicament resulting from the Queer community in Muslim Arab spaces being trapped within and/or "in-between" two seemingly oppositional forces (neoliberalism and Sunni Islam), each of which envisions queerness in different ways, but neither is true to it (which I will explicate in Parts 3 and 4).

I want to raise these concerns and warrants before delving further into what it means for us to be of the same being, as in one human species (i.e., “Western” people and “Sunni Arab Muslims” are all human) but not of the same kind (i.e., we have different ways of being in the world, and approach and legitimize our concerns differently).

Doing so is important in order to be true to the topic (i.e., address it critically, with all honesty, audacity, and so on), appreciate its complexity (i.e., understand all the contributors complicating the queer predicament to truly understand what it is to be Queer, Arab, and Sunni at this time), as well as to be reminded not to approach it lightly or without care (i.e., the queer predicament at the contemporary moment is *entangled* with a plethora of complicated concerns and underlying warrants, all of which demand and deserve attention). Moreover, it is also important to address such concerns because a wholesome solution must eventually tend to all of them.

To proceed, I first define my usages of the terms pre-modern, modern, and post-modern¹⁰⁶ (which is important to do because our perceptions of what is “modern” is a *concern* in and of itself and have a lot to do with the Western political approaches through which solutions to the queer predicaments in non-Western spaces are mandated). I then discuss other relevant concerns and warrants within three main categories (which helps in making sense of them): *the Religious* (concerns and warrants that we may primarily consider “religious” in nature), *the Political* (concerns and warrants that we may primarily consider “political”

106 I use hyphens to separate the prefixes “pre” (which means “before”) and “post” (which means “after”) from the word “modern” (i.e., against the conventional practice of writing “premodern” and “postmodern” as unhyphenated single words). I do so to *emphasize* the word “modern” as a standalone (which the prefixes “pre” and “post” are qualifying). That is, I use the hyphen to highlight the seemingly *ubiquitous* understanding of a *singular* discrete “modern” period, and the implication that there was a definite singular time *prior* to it (pre), and a definite singular time *after* it (post), all of which I critique in this chapter.

in nature), and *the Scientific* (concerns and warrants that we may primarily consider “scientific” in nature)¹⁰⁷. I give preliminary definitions¹⁰⁸ of what I mean by *the Religious*, *the Political*, and *the Scientific* as categories in each of their respective locations. After each definition, I follow up with how some of these concerns and warrants manifest (more specifically) within the conversation on queer issues in Sunni Islam today.

On Pre-Modern, Modern, and Post-Modern Terminology

To universalize *responsibly*¹⁰⁹, I must first problematize what we often mean by the pre-modern, modern, and post-modern periods. These terms are problematic because they have been defined in relation to Western history, as well as universalized and imposed as such¹¹⁰ (which undermines critical human differences that gave rise to other peoples’ histories and civilizations). To proceed, modernity has sometimes been defined as:

...the self-definition of a generation about its own technological innovation, governance, and socioeconomics. To

107 It is also important to mention that such concerns and warrants are entangled temporally, spatially, and contextually within themselves and also within one another. That is, they all influence (and are influenced by) each other. I also use the definite article “the” with *Religious*, *Political*, and *Scientific* (which I use as proper nouns and hence capitalize them) to describe the specific and particular categories of concerns and warrants within the various systems of “meaning-making”. For example, *the Religious* as a category of concerns and warrants refers to the specific and particular way of approaching some concerns about a particular topic from within a religious framework, which is different from the way *the Political* approaches those concerns (because the system which informs those concerns, legitimizes their warrants, and allows for “meaning-making”, changes, and so on).

108 I will revisit their definitions in Part 2.

109 That is, to acknowledge (and act accordingly with) the reality that there are “tropes” or ideas that are universal (such as the concept of injustice; I discussed the idea of “tropes” in 1.1, footnote 85), but how such ideas manifest and are experienced remains contextual (and therefore how we approach them must also be contextual). Obviously, we have commonalities we can universalize, given that we are one species. The understanding that we are one species is universal in and of itself. However, if we are to universalize some aspects of our existence, we must do so responsibly.

110 This is akin to how certain particularities of injustice have been defined, universalized, and imposed (as explained in 1.1).

participate in modernity was to conceive of one's society as engaging in organizational and knowledge advances that make one's immediate predecessors appear antiquated or, at least, surpassed...More specifically, modernity [from the point of view of a Western perspective] was associated with individual subjectivity, scientific explanation and rationalization, a decline in emphasis on religious worldviews, the emergence of bureaucracy, rapid urbanization, the rise of nation-states, and accelerated financial exchange and communication¹¹¹.

While there is nothing *seemingly* wrong with that definition, that is, when understood as a definition produced by a particular intellectual lineage about its *own* historical reality (e.g., the West decides what its Western modernity means), the problem arises when the definition is imposed as a universal one (e.g. Western modernity is modernity for all). That is when the definition assumes that the ways in which one kind of human “modernizes” (the West in our case) represents the standard and/or meaning of modernity for all others.

From that point on, this universalism (and/or universalizing) of modernity necessarily defines “the Other” (if it acknowledges the legitimacy of “the Other” at all) based on its own terms of what it perceives as modern, in accordance with its own subjectivities¹¹², starting points, and what is pre-modern and post-modern to it. This becomes especially problematic when it is the basis of policy decisions and military interventions, forcing onto others a “universal” reality (such as Western solutions to the Western queer cause) to which all of humanity is then held accountable

¹¹¹ See Sharon L. Snyder, “Modernity”, in *Britannica Academic*, accessed November 10, 2019, find the URL in the bibliography.

¹¹² In the case of Western modernity, that means its emphasis on individualism, empiricism, rationalization, certain unfavorable views about religion, and so on.

(which the “West” can and does do because of its current military, economic, political, and cultural stronghold on the rest of the world).

Such a framing of modernity (as universal to all) has tangible consequences by reducing the different realities of different people (at different times, places, and contexts) to a single reality for one kind of people (the politically and socioeconomically dominant kind), as if only a single *kind* of human has existed, and has done so within a single temporal, spatial, and contextual lineage¹¹³. I problematize this hegemonic notion of modernity for a few reasons:

First is its insistence on a certain notion of *progress* (i.e., human advancement) as *secular* (i.e., non-religious for now), *linear* (i.e., having a clear chronological beginning, middle, and end, if it ends at all), *inevitable* (i.e., we will eventually reach all our goals and solve all of our “problems”), and *uniform* (i.e., the entitled view that the only kind of progress that matters is a secular “Western” one, and as such it must necessarily be the natural trajectory for *all* human kinds, thereby undervaluing the

113 Here I am reminded of something I came across, written by Professor of Anthropology Michel-Rolph Trouillot: “‘Modernity’ is a murky term that belongs to a family of words we may label ‘North Atlantic universals’. By that, I mean words inherited from what we now call the West—which I prefer to call the North Atlantic, not only for the sake of geographical precision—that project the North Atlantic experience on a universal scale that they have helped to create. North Atlantic universals are particulars that have gained a degree of universality, chunks of human history that have become historical standards. Words such as ‘development’, ‘progress’, ‘democracy’, and indeed the ‘West’ itself are exemplary members of that family which contracts or expands according to contexts and interlocutors... North Atlantic universals so defined are not merely descriptive or referential. They do not describe the world; they offer visions of the world. While they appear to refer to things as they exist, rooted in a particular history, they are evocative of multiple layers of sensibilities, persuasions, cultural assumptions, and ideological choices tied to that localized history. They come to us loaded with aesthetic and stylistic sensibilities, religious and philosophical persuasions, cultural assumptions that range from what it means to be a human being to the proper relationship between humans and the natural world, and ideological choices that range from the nature of the political to its possibilities of transformation. To be sure, there is no unanimity within the North Atlantic itself on any of these issues. Still, there is a shared history of how these issues have been and should be debated. These words carry that history...”; see Trouillot, Michel-Rolph, “The Otherwise Man: Caribbean Lessons from the Savage Slot”, in *Critically Modern: Alternatives, Alterities, Anthropologies*, ed. Knauff, Bruce M. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2002), 220.

importance of religious conceptions and other ways of being in the world that is not Western and/or secular). This necessarily relates to another problematic insistence, a presupposition that *all* views held outside of what is considered Western modernity¹¹⁴ are archaic (e.g., the view that if one is religious, one is somehow antiquated)¹¹⁵.

Second, I consider this conceptualization of modernity (i.e., Western modernity is universal to all) as a problem because of its warrant of the human as the center of the universe (which undervalues other ways of being that do not put humans at the center of the universe), and that it is inevitably only a matter of time before all humans “secularize” and figure out the answers to all our problems (which again, becomes a problem when universalized and imposed on others).

Third, this approach to modernity is a problem because of its warrant that all humans are *exactly*¹¹⁶ the same (which is implied if we accept that there is but a single way of being a human, namely, a Western way of being and single modernity worthy of universalization and/or universalizing, namely, Western modernity). To relate this to my thesis, this warrant (that all humans must be exactly the same) translates as the presupposition that Queer people are all the same, have the same history, struggles, and so on (i.e., they have lived through the same historical lineage and “modernized”, or must modernize, the same way), and Western trajectories and solutions to Western queer predicaments are therefore *viable* for everyone.

114 Such as the various other ways for humans to organize themselves around social, economic, political, and other matters.

115 Which includes the negation of the possibility of conceptualizing religion as a way to be modern (in and of itself) and ignoring the different kinds of modernities that religion has produced and advanced (in the past but also to acknowledge the contributions of religion on the present, for where we are could not have been possible without the contributions of various religions on “modern” science and global culture).

116 I alluded in the introduction to the fact that, as a human species, we are not exactly the same. I will discuss this in further detail in 1.3.

On an Alternative Conceptualization of Modernity

Alternatively, I suggest we conceptualize modernity as an age of advancement (i.e., a contextual kind of advancement defined and manifested differently by different peoples, at different times and places) through which a collective of people rise to power and excel, before which (i.e., pre-modernity to them) they were not powerful, and after which (i.e., post-modernity to them) their relationship to power changed in ways that became complicated, challenged, compromised, diminished in its effects, and/or collapsed altogether¹¹⁷.

By doing this, we do not universalize a single understanding of “progress” or advancement nor limit it to a single people nor to a single way. Human history then becomes a witness to *pluralisms* of modernities (which have at times coexisted and been in tandem with various other pre-modernities and post-modernities). That is the case because human history is composed of a multiplicity of human *histories* about various people at different times, in different places and contexts (and therefore, we have different reigns of modernities, understandings of progress, and so on).

As such, it is necessary to qualify the terms pre-modern, modern, and post-modern in relation to the times, places, and peoples they are referencing. For that purpose, I qualify the terms as “Western” when referring to the modern Western period¹¹⁸ and “Islamic” when referring to the modern Islamic period¹¹⁹.

117 That is, to the point where their reign of advancement (whether for themselves or as a source of inspiration and resources for others) is no longer independent and/or viable as a power structure (because they no longer have “power”, which, as a “tool”, may amount to having agency, political, and socioeconomic control over resources, the ability to influence situations and/or events, and so on). I started to talk about power in the introduction and will explore what I mean by it in further detail in 2.1.

118 That is, I refer to the time in which the West exited what is labeled as “the Dark Ages” and went through the “Renaissance” and “the Enlightenment” periods (which I will discuss in further detail in Part 3). As such, Western modernity is considered to have lasted from the end of the 14th through the middle of the 20th centuries.

119 That is, when I refer to the time in which Muslims became a defined *‘ummah* (Muslim

On Other Concerns and Warrants

After problematizing the singular conception of modernity (modernity as Western) and offering an alternative that emphasizes a pluralism of modernities (all of which have been equally important in the advancement and development of our collective human species and will continue to be so), I want to transition to the other concerns and warrants that are entangled with the queer predicament of Sunni Arab spaces at this current juncture of time. As stated earlier, I will discuss these concerns and warrants using three analytical categories: *the Religious*, *the Political*, and *the Scientific*.

On the Religious Concerns and the Privileging of the “Soul”

*The Religious*¹²⁰ (for now), as an analytical category, references the *transcendental*¹²¹ systems of “meaning-making”¹²² through which various human collectives have been inspired to make sense of the world and their existence in it. While such systems manifest in a variety of ways, I want to focus on what I will refer to as *the Religious* within monotheistic

community, nation, and so on) in the 7th century and throughout the height of their civilization, which is known as “the Golden Age”, and is roughly estimated to be between the 8th and 15th centuries. For more on the so-called “Islamic Golden Age”, see Ahmed Renima, Habib Tiliouine, and Richard J. Estes, “The Islamic Golden Age: A Story of the Triumph of the Islamic Civilization”, in *The State of Social Progress of Islamic Societies: Social, Economical, Political, and Ideological Challenges*, ed. Habib Tiliouine and Richard J. Estes, International Handbooks of Quality-of-Life (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2016), 25–52.

120 I will define this term in detail in 2.2, but for now, it is the system through which a monotheistic tradition is guided.

121 By which I mean beyond the will of humans.

122 To reiterate, I use the term “meaning-making” as a descriptive label of the system, not of those who are within it (see chapter 1.1, footnote 93). It does not necessarily imply human construction, nor that humans have any agency in making God their source of authority. Within a theocentric structure such as that of Sunni Islam, it would simply reference the Will of God as the way through which Sunnis as a collective make sense of the world.

traditions¹²³ (such as Sunni Islam as a religious system of meaning-making¹²⁴) that have a specific *shared* lineage of understandings (collectively known as Abrahamic faiths and/or traditions) in terms of what it means to be human, and how humans ought to conduct themselves.

In major Abrahamic monotheisms (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), *the Religious* system of meaning-making revolves around the Will of God¹²⁵. As a system, it is edified by various scriptures informing understandings of the genesis, continuity, and eschatological¹²⁶ end of the human species. The human within this meaning-making system is conceived of as a created *assemblage*¹²⁷ of body, mind, and soul¹²⁸.

Of the three, the soul is perhaps the focal point of religious life, for it is the eternal “immaterial essence, animating principle” that would be passed on to the next life (i.e., it is what one would work hard to edify in this life in service of God, to please God, be saved from eternal damnation, and so on). Ultimately, within this religious conceptualization, the soul is the means by which the individual is connected to what is beyond

123 That is, those traditions who believe in one God and live their lives accordingly.

124 That is, acknowledging its convergences with similar monotheistic traditions that had and have influences over its historical understanding of what it is to be human and how humans within such traditions ought to live.

125 By “Will of God”, I simply mean that all these monotheistic religions revolve around what God instructs, and people who follow these monotheistic traditions try to live their lives in ways that would please Him. The “Will of God” plays a major role in the queer predicament in Sunni Islam, which I will discuss in greater detail in Part 4.

126 Understandings that are “concerned with death, judgement, and the final destiny of the soul and humankind”; see “Eschatology, (n.)”, in *Lexico Dictionaries | English* (Oxford University Press), accessed July 12, 2021, find the URL in the bibliography.

127 By “assemblages”, I mean a grouping of various things in ways in which the parts of the group could not be viewed as independent of one another or the whole. I will build on this definition in Part 3.

128 A soul as in “the immaterial essence, animating principle, or actuating cause of an individual life...”; see “Soul, (n.)”, in *Merriam-Webster*, accessed November 19, 2019, find the URL in the bibliography.

this world and to which the individual's other parts (namely body and mind) are subordinated.

While I am not interested in theorizing what “soul” is in greater detail or reducing it to a simple terminology (especially that it has merited *sophisticated* discussions in the various religious, even non-religious, traditions), I do want to think of one aspect of the human soul (for the purposes of this work) as simply the “thing” that differentiates humans (but not *just* humans) as *animate* (i.e., “alive”) beings from inanimate objects; the “immaterial essence, animating principle” of human beings, by virtue of which their human physical forms *burst* with “life” in this world, and through which they are *connected* to what is believed to be a world beyond it (i.e., to God).

That is, there is something about animate humans (i.e., their souls) that makes them “alive” (and drives them to live their lives in certain ways), which is not present in inanimate objects like stones. With a “soul”, a human is alive *in* this world and is connected to what is beyond it, and without it, a human is dead *to* this world.

Because of the emphasis of *the Religious* (as a transcendental system of meaning-making in monotheistic Abrahamic traditions but especially in Sunni Islam ¹²⁹) on edifying and prioritizing the soul, which connects the human to the beyond through living this life in preparation for the next, I am going to refer to this religious approach as a *soul-first* approach (because both body and mind are secondary and in service to it) within a *God-first* approach (because everything within *the Religious* as a way of being is in service to God).

I discuss the “soul” in the Abrahamic faith traditions because a religious life revolves around (i.e., prioritizes) it, and therefore it is important

¹²⁹ For it is the system of “meaning-making” that is most relevant to my conversation about the contemporary queer predicament in Sunni Arabs spaces.

to this work. That is, being “religious”, and all its subsequent concerns about living this life in service to God (which includes the negotiation of whether “queerness” is theologically acceptable within a certain tradition) has an emphasis on the soul, and this emphasis distinguishes it from the emphasis on the other parts of the human assemblage (namely, body and/or mind). That is to say, the question of whether queerness is permitted in a religious tradition like Islam is *ultimately* a question about the Will of God, and therefore, it is about whether the answer to the question affirms or troubles the human soul in its ultimate quest (i.e., pleasing and affirming the Will of God)¹³⁰.

This means, *the Religious* as a system of meaning-making¹³¹ (that is concerned about what it means to be human and how humans ought to conduct themselves to please God) must necessarily play a critical role in how the Queer subject, like all other subjects, is conceived and perceived (e.g., is being Queer soul-affirming? Does it please God?). The queer-cause within *the Religious* must therefore be negotiated within this soul-first, God-first framework, a process that manifests differently within different Abrahamic faith traditions and/or sects.

When I started thinking about this topic for my master’s thesis, I knew (based on previous and continuing research) that same-sex sexuality could be accommodated within the tradition of Sunni Islam in a way that honors the traditional framework of how theological accommodations are made (i.e., within this soul-first, God-first way of being in the world). I became convinced that there was a way, but it was not yet articulated within what

130 This is also why it is not easy for people within religious systems of meaning-making to simply forgo their historical and traditional understandings of queerness to privilege “secular” ones.

131 A system committed to a monotheistic transcendental understanding of power structures (God is in power, not humans) have a certain understanding of what it is to be human (i.e., humans are limited in terms of capacity, ability, and so on). This is in contrast to other meaning-making systems such as *the Political* and *the Scientific*, which “endow” the human with ultimate control and agency.

I believed to be the right framework. Originally, I wanted to elucidate how such an accommodation could be possible.

However, since then, I have realized the issue is not so simple. That is, the queer predicament is not only entangled with what Sunnis in Islam believe or do not believe. The queer predicament in Sunni Islam is also entangled in a host of many other concerns and warrants at our contemporary juncture. Concerns and warrants that do not just speak about Islam, but predate it, and not only answer to Sunni Islam as a “power structure”, but especially to power structures of radically different kinds¹³².

As a contemporary religious concern, to talk about the queer predicament requires deep, thoughtful engagement with the role(s) of religions, such as Islam, within the predominantly secular public sphere (e.g., we must take religion seriously and we cannot only paint religion as hostile to Queer folks). For example, it is to talk about (what came to be known as) the post-modern/post-colonial *crisis of authority* in Islam and its entanglement with pre-modern and modern understandings of authority¹³³. What is Islam (i.e., what are the boundaries of the various Islamic traditions, and how do they negotiate theological and legal matters of contention?) and who do Muslims answer to (i.e., who is the authority in the various Islamic traditions?) at this globalized juncture that does not seem to have Islam as its overarching system of meaning-making? Who do Muslims seek to adjudicate on the “contentious” matter of queerness, for example, and turn to to ask whether being Queer could be accommodated within the tradition? Can Sunni Islam, for example, answer to (i.e., take seriously) what it does not perceive as

132 I will talk about the differences in the relevant power structures in Part 2.

133 For relevant work on this issue, see Zareena Grewal, *Islam Is a Foreign Country: American Muslims and the Global Crisis of Authority*, Nation of Newcomers: Immigrant History as American History (New York: New York University Press, 2014).

Sunni versions of itself, including what is termed as progressive Islam (which is an approach to queering Muslim spaces in the West that I will discuss further in Part 3)?

More so, to talk about queerness is also to become entangled in the varying attitudes towards Islam in general (often polemical), which include the attitudes of those who are nostalgic for some earlier version of it (who some label as *romanticists*), the attitudes of those who are defenders of it (who some label as *apologists*), and the attitudes of those who attempt to reform it (who some label as *revisionists*), all of whom have something to say about queerness in Islam at this moment in time. Such varying attitudes and how they approach queerness and other topics are often more about their commitments to particular secular *political* affiliations and agendas than they are concerned with the underlying commitments to the religion that they romanticize, defend, and/or revise. That is, they are often not even true to their own professed narratives (as I hope will become clear throughout my thesis).

On the Political Concerns and the Privileging of the “Body”

I use *the Political* (for now) as an analytical category to reference systems of meaning-making that attempt to organize the various human collectives (i.e., as in different kinds of people, which I will discuss further in 1.3) and ensure their well-being in terms of protection, survival, advancement, continuation, and so on. Various human collectives have approached *the Political* differently throughout time and space. Among others, some have approached it as a transcendental religious concern (e.g., political organization is made under the warrants of a God-first system) and some as secular (as in the sense that humans are in full control of their destinies and organization, not God, i.e., under the warrants of a human-first system).

Of particular interest (in terms of the current queer predicament of Sunni Arab spaces) is not only the *persisting* transcendental understanding of how to ensure the political well-being of humans from within a religious system (as once may have been the case entirely) but also how to do it now from within the currently dominant secular worldview (in other words, religion remains critically important for many people and collectives, irrespective of the domination of secularism, and the negotiation of queerness within religious frameworks remains relevant and vital).

Because *the Political* within the secular system is mainly concerned with human *bodies* and their organization, survival, protection, and continuation, it privileges the human body in its approach (as opposed to the soul or mind). I will refer to it as a *body-first* within a *human-first* approach (as opposed to a soul-first within a God-first approach)¹³⁴.

134 It seems to me that there is some truth to the idea that politics tend to humans as *bodies*, setting “the body” as a priority (before mind and soul, even though both mind and soul remain important for a body-first approach), because politics tend to be concerned with things such as the organization of bodies, ensuring their survival, protection, continuation, and so on (which seems true even when politics seem most concerned about territories, environments, and others because it ultimately cares about territories and environments for the preservation and survival of the human body). Here I am also building on some related ideas that have been theorized in the Academy, such as the idea of biopolitics (where “bio” means *life*), in which bodies become political tools. “Biopolitics is a complicated concept that has been used and developed in social theory since Michel Foucault, to examine the strategies and mechanisms through which human life processes are managed under regimes of authority over knowledge, power, and the processes of subjectivation”; see Laura Garrison, “Biopolitics: An Overview”, *The Anthropology of Biopolitics* (blog), accessed November 12, 2019, find the URL in the bibliography. But just as the preservation of the human “body” has been a central theme for politics, so has the “elimination” of the human body by what has been termed as “the politics of death”, or *necropolitics* (where “necro” means *death*), as developed by Professor Achille Mbembe (and built on by many others), which speak to and about how politics and social conditions in this “modern” age dictate how some people may live (e.g., some “races” are better and more privileged than others) and how others (“poor” people, “people of color”, etc.) are forced to die. This is also related to queer politics and sexuality and how they play out in the local and global political arenas (e.g., think about the use and manipulation of “AIDS” as a political tool against the Queer “body”) for “our necropolitical present-future”, which has “its emphases on bodies, desires, pleasures, tactility, rhythms, echoes, textures, deaths, morbidity, torture, pain, sensation, and punishment...” makes it “imperative to rearticulate what queer theory and studies of sexuality have to say about the metatheories and the ‘real-politiks’ of Empire, often understood, as Joan Scott observes, as ‘the real business of politics...’”; see Jasbir K. Puar, “Queer Times, Queer Assemblages”, *Social Text* 23, no. 3-4 (84-85) (December 1,

That is relevant because what it means to be Queer in Sunni Arab spaces today (but not just Sunni Arab spaces, for other religious spaces may also be going through similar dynamics) is also to be *stuck* in a political contention between two power structures: a dominant secular one insisting on a universal definition of human rights that must equally apply to all Queer folks everywhere, no matter the truth or consequences (a topic of my discussion in 3.2) and a religious one insisting on a different course of action. This stems from the warrant that human progress is chronological along a specific linear political progression (i.e., religions of the past were merely a means to a secular political end), Western political modernity is superior to every other kind of political development (i.e., other modernities), and Western political solutions are adequate to all problems around the world.

This secular political orientation feeds back into another warrant in terms of what it means to be “human”, that if we are all one species, then all people must need and benefit from the same models of political organization. This is central to the political predicament of Islam and Muslims at large, who have largely been colonized, dehumanized, and oppressed by what we have come to know as *whiteness*¹³⁵ (which includes how Islam and Muslims have been othered, Orientalized, islamophobic, racialized, and so on).

In fact, ideas such as the “Clash of Civilizations”, or calling certain Muslim nations (and others) the “Graveyard of Empires”¹³⁶ when they

2005): 121. For a quick overview of Necropolitics, see Antonio Pele, “Achille Mbembe: Necropolitics”, *Critical Legal Thinking* (blog), accessed January 10, 2022, find the URL in the bibliography.

135 I will come back to this in 2.1.

136 For a recent example on this, see the “professed” reason why the United States “ended” its decades-long occupation of Afghanistan; see Alexander Hainy-Khaleeli, “Why We Need to Stop Calling Afghanistan ‘the Graveyard of Empires’”, *Ajam Media Collective* (blog), accessed August 24, 2021, find the URL in the bibliography.

refuse to conform to Western ideas of modernity and progress, have become appealing because they stem from principles of coloniality and reinforce it: Muslims are portrayed as inherently opposed to *all* kinds of progress (since progress must be Western) and therefore must be “tamed” and “civilized” (to look and/or behave more Western). This portrayal of Islam and Muslims includes how Muslims approach queerness and Queer people (i.e., Islam and Muslims are consistently demonized).

Consequently, the “Western” understanding of “Queer” and queerness become (have been) another *political tool* for the West to further *dehumanize* the East, as well as a tool for the East to *retaliate* and push back against the West (for instance, queerness is viewed by Muslims as a Western construct, Queer people, i.e., those who are “born this way”¹³⁷ do not exist, and those who “pretend” to be Queer are then a target for violence, and so on)¹³⁸.

On the Scientific Concerns and the Privileging of the “Mind”

I use *the Scientific*¹³⁹ (for now) as an analytical category to reference systems of meaning-making that attempt to make sense of the world and all of its phenomena through prioritization of the mind (i.e., as in rationalization and logic) part of the human assemblage in what I label as a *mind-first* approach within a *human-first* approach. By that, I mean

¹³⁷ I will complicate the idea of “born this way” in 3.3.

¹³⁸ I will discuss this in detail in Part 3.

¹³⁹ *The Scientific*, for me, is broadly conceived as the system of all that is knowable rationally, empirically, ontologically [“the philosophical study of being in general...”; see “Ontology”, in *Britannica Academic*, accessed November 10, 2019, find the URL in the bibliography] and epistemologically [“the philosophical study of the nature, origin, and limits of human knowledge”; see “Epistemology”, in *Britannica Academic*, accessed November 10, 2019, find the URL in the bibliography]. Science, as a word, comes from the Latin *Scientia* which means “knowledge, awareness, understanding, branch of knowledge, learning”; see “History and Etymology for *science*” under “Science, (n.)”, in *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* (Merriam-Webster, Inc.), accessed November 19, 2019, find the URL in the bibliography.

(for now) the *positivist*¹⁴⁰ attitudes about the nature of knowledge, what we *can* know¹⁴¹, and our attitudes about the role knowledge plays in our lives, but also how the human mind contributes to humanity in terms of certainty, gives us directives about the future (which is tied to narratives about progress), what should be brought forward (e.g., secularism), and what should be left behind (e.g., religion)¹⁴². The general attitude within a mind-first approach is that the mind is the answer to all our questions. In Western modernity, this mind-first approach to understanding the world is rooted in the Enlightenment project¹⁴³ but also in its predecessor, the Renaissance¹⁴⁴.

140 “Positivism, in Western philosophy, generally, any system that confines itself to the data of experience and excludes a priori [knowledge independent from experience, it exists as truth on its own; see “A Priori Knowledge”, in *Britannica Academic*, accessed November 12, 2019, find the URL in the bibliography] or metaphysical [philosophical study to determine the real nature of things, or concerned with “a reality beyond what is perceptible to the senses”]; see “Metaphysical, (adj.)”, *Merriam-Webster*, accessed July 13, 2021, find the URL in the bibliography] speculations. More narrowly, the term designates the thought of the French philosopher Auguste Comte (1798–1857)”; see “Positivism”, in *Britannica Academic*, accessed November 12, 2019, find the URL in the bibliography.

141 As in we can know everything, it is only a matter of time, and that knowledge is verifiable empirically.

142 Here I am reminded of something I read by Professor Judith Butler: “There is always something left behind, especially in aggressive notions of progress that hold out the promise of a kind of final redemption”; see Jonathan VanAntwerpen and Eduardo Mendietta, eds., “Dialogue: Judith Butler and Cornel West”, in *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 104.

143 “European intellectual movement of the 17th and 18th centuries in which ideas concerning God, reason, nature, and humanity were synthesized into a worldview that gained wide assent in the West and that instigated revolutionary developments in art, philosophy, and politics. Central to Enlightenment thought were the use and celebration of reason, the power by which humans understand the universe and improve their own condition. The goals of rational humanity were considered to be knowledge, freedom, and happiness”; see “Enlightenment” in *Britannica Academic*, accessed November 12, 2019, find the URL in the bibliography.

144 “Renaissance, (French: ‘Rebirth’) period in European civilization immediately following the Middle Ages and conventionally held to have been characterized by a surge of interest in Classical scholarship [ancient Greece and Roman] and values. The Renaissance also witnessed the discovery and exploration of new continents, the substitution of the Copernican for the Ptolemaic system of astronomy, the decline of the feudal system and the growth of commerce, and the invention or application of such potentially powerful innovations... To the scholars and thinkers of the day,

To think about the queer predicament in Sunni Arab spaces in the 21st century, as a scientific concern, is to talk about human sexuality and certain various (Western but also Islamic and other) pre-modern and modern understandings of the role of nature and nurture in human development as concrete influencers, and the destabilization of such categories in “Western” post-modern¹⁴⁵ times. It is to define and rationalize the nature of what it is to be a sexual being, creating a category of “normal” and “healthy”, from which the standardized deviation are the various manifestations of the Queer community (i.e., in terms of biological sex, sexual orientation, and gender identity)¹⁴⁶. It is also to discuss the nature of the sexual human through constructionism versus essentialism, inborn versus acquired, the understanding of sex and gender in terms of concrete categories versus fluidity and performativity, and so on¹⁴⁷.

To conclude this chapter, the queer predicament in today’s Sunni Arab spaces is heavily entangled with a multiplicity of concerns and warrants which all come at it from various temporal, spatial, and contextual orientations (i.e., from various pre-modernities, modernities, and

however, it was primarily a time of the revival of classical learning and wisdom after a long period of cultural decline and stagnation”; see “Renaissance”, in *Britannica Academic*, accessed November 12, 2019, find the URL in the bibliography.

145 “...in Western philosophy, a late 20th-century movement characterized by broad skepticism, subjectivism, or relativism; a general suspicion of reason, and an acute sensitivity to the role of ideology in asserting and maintaining political and economic power”. This quote is from an article that juxtaposes modern and postmodern assumptions in Western philosophy. For example, while *modernists* believe there is “...such a thing as human nature; it consists of faculties, aptitudes, or dispositions that are in some sense present in human beings at birth rather than learned or instilled through social forces”, *postmodernists* “insist that all, or nearly all aspects of human psychology are completely socially determined”; see Brian Duignan, “Postmodernism”, in *Britannica Academic*, accessed November 10, 2019, find the URL in the bibliography.

146 The current predicament has its roots in Western pre-modernity in terms of what Muslims (during their own modern period, roughly between the 8–15th centuries), like many before and after them (including the West), then understood what it is to be a sexual human: heteronormative understanding of biological sex, sexual orientation, and gender roles. I will revisit this in Part 4.

147 I will address these concerns in 3.3.

post-modernities, as well as from within various categories of concerns and warrants, some of which I discussed under the categories of *the Religious*, *the Political*, and *the Scientific*). See Figure 6.

Consequently, I could not talk about queer sexuality as an *isolated* topic from within Sunni Islam without postulating a theory that makes sense of and responds to the different forces shaping and creating the queer predicament of Sunni Arab spaces at this moment in time. For this reason, this project has expanded beyond a strictly legal and historical analysis about queerness in Sunni Islam (which motivated its inception) to also speak *on being* in general (such as exploring what it is to exist as a human species and be sexual, political, religious, and so on)¹⁴⁸.

148 That is, this is a conversation on *being*, not only sexually in terms of the complicated inquiries about the intricacies of human sexuality as they pertain to queerness in Sunni Islam, but also about human sexuality in general (e.g., how it works and manifests), human “race” (e.g., what it means to be human developmentally), inter-faith, -space and -communal dialogues (e.g., the need for coexistence and what is “viable” in terms of approaching it), systems of power (i.e., their various organizations, applications, and the historical and contemporary consequences of that), and much more.

Concerns and Warrants in the Queer Predicament of Sunni Arab Spaces Today

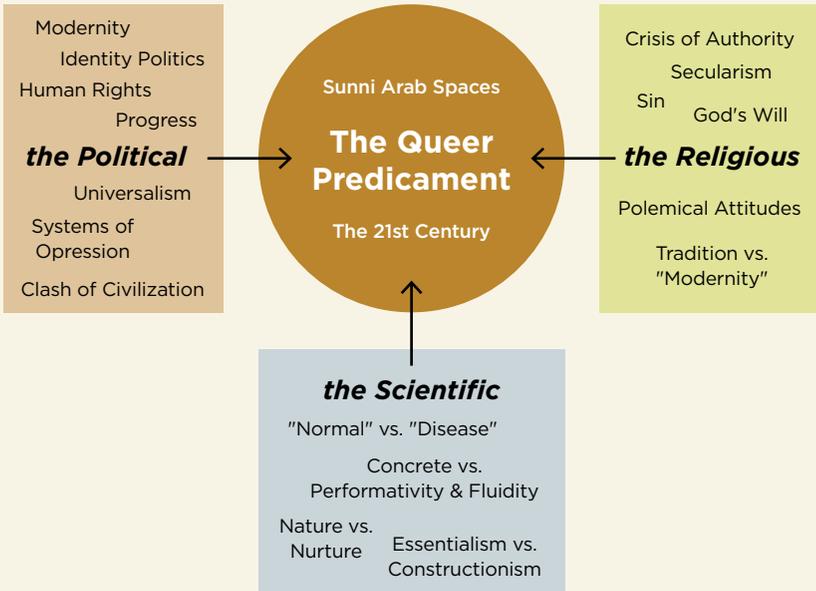


FIGURE 6: Contemporary Concerns and Warrants in the Queer Predicament

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- “A Priori Knowledge”. In *Britannica Academic*. Accessed November 12, 2019. <https://academic-eb-com.proxy.uchicago.edu/levels/collegiate/article/a-priori-knowledge/3196>.
- Duignan, Brian. “Postmodernism”. In *Britannica Academic*. Accessed November 10, 2019. <https://academic-eb-com.proxy.uchicago.edu/levels/collegiate/article/postmodernism/384857>.
- “Enlightenment”. In *Britannica Academic*. Accessed November 12, 2019. <https://academic-eb-com.proxy.uchicago.edu/levels/collegiate/article/Enlightenment/32680>.
- “Epistemology”. In *Britannica Academic*. Accessed November 10, 2019. <https://academic-eb-com.proxy.uchicago.edu/levels/collegiate/article/epistemology/106052>.
- “Eschatology, (n.)”. In *Lexico Dictionaries | English*. Oxford University Press. Accessed July 12, 2021. <https://www.lexico.com/definition/eschatology>.
- Garrison, Laura. “Biopolitics: An Overview”. *The Anthropology of Biopolitics: A Blog about Knowledge, Power, and the Individual in Society Today* (blog). Accessed November 12, 2019. <https://anthrobiopolitics.wordpress.com/2013/01/21/biopolitics-an-overview/>.
- Grewal, Zareena. *Islam Is a Foreign Country: American Muslims and the Global Crisis of Authority*. Nation of Newcomers: Immigrant History as American History. New York: New York University Press, 2014.
- Hainy-Khaleeli, Alexander. “Why We Need to Stop Calling Afghanistan ‘the Graveyard of Empires’”. *Ajam Media Collective* (blog). Accessed August 24, 2021. <https://ajammc.com/2021/08/24/stop-calling-afghanistan-graveyard-empires/>.
- Khattab, Mustafa, trans. “Surah 33. Al-Ahzab, Ayah 72”. Accessed July 13, 2021. <https://www.alim.org/quran/compare/surah/33/72>.
- “Metaphysical, (Adj.)”. In *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*. Merriam-Webster Inc. Accessed July 13, 2021. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/metaphysical>.
- Michel-Rolph, Trouillot. “The Otherwise Man: Caribbean Lessons from the Savage Slot”. In *Critically Modern: Alternatives, Alterities, Anthropologies*, edited by Knauff, Bruce M. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2002.
- “Ontology”. In *Britannica Academic*. Accessed November 10, 2019. <https://academic-eb-com.proxy.uchicago.edu/levels/collegiate/article/ontology/57152>.

- Pele, Antonio. "Achille Mbembe: Necropolitics". *Critical Legal Thinking* (blog). Accessed January 10, 2022. <https://criticallegalthinking.com/2020/03/02/achille-mbembe-necropolitics/>.
- "Positivism". In *Britannica Academic*. Accessed November 12, 2019. <https://academic-eb-com.proxy.uchicago.edu/levels/collegiate/article/positivism/108682>.
- Puar, Jasbir K. "Queer Times, Queer Assemblages". *Social Text* 23, no. 3-4 (84-85) (December 1, 2005): 121-39. https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-23-3-4_84-85-121.
- "Renaissance". In *Britannica Academic*. Accessed November 12, 2019. <https://academic-eb-com.proxy.uchicago.edu/levels/collegiate/article/Renaissance/63161>.
- Renima, Ahmed, Habib Tiliouine, and Richard J. Estes. "The Islamic Golden Age: A Story of the Triumph of the Islamic Civilization". In *The State of Social Progress of Islamic Societies: Social, Economic, Political, and Ideological Challenges*, edited by Habib Tiliouine and Richard J. Estes, 25-52. International Handbooks of Quality-of-Life. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2016. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-24774-8_2.
- "Science, (n.)". In *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*. Merriam-Webster, Inc. Accessed November 19, 2019. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/science>.
- Snyder, Sharon L. "Modernity". In *Britannica Academic*. Accessed November 10, 2019. <https://academic-eb-com.proxy.uchicago.edu/levels/collegiate/article/modernity/605418>.
- "Soul, (n.)". In *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*. Merriam-Webster Inc. Accessed November 19, 2019. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/soul>.
- VanAntwerpen, Jonathan, and Eduardo Mendieta, eds. "Dialogue: Judith Butler and Cornel West". In *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011.
- "Warrant, (n.1)". In *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. Accessed June 4, 2020. <https://www-oed-com.proxy.uchicago.edu/view/Entry/225837>.

A MESSAGE FROM THE AUTHOR

DEAR READER,

It is with great privilege that I can share this online publication with you. This installment is a part of my book, *Halal This Way: Towards a Viable Queering in Sunni Islam*.

My quest into this topic has been a lifelong journey, and being gay in a Palestinian, Arab, and Muslim context has defined my existence. I felt lost ever since I became cognizant of my queer-predicament. There was no clarity on what I was going through. The research to get the answers was not easy, and getting there was tremendously costly (both on personal and financial levels). What you read here is a product of that onerous journey.

To be truly honest with you, I needed to do this work on my terms and with my principles intact. I realized early on that the only way for me to do so is to start my own platform. This is why Halal This Way, LLC (the official publisher of this work) was conceived.

I am both humbled and proud of the work I have done on this topic so far. To be able to construct a viable path towards the theological and legal acceptance of queer matters in Sunni Islam at this moment in time is not an easy task. This work is especially complicated given the global political and socioeconomic context in which it operates. However, I am convinced that there is a viable way to do so, which I highlight in this publication (as a whole). As such, it is only a matter of time within Sunni Islam before many categories of Queer Muslims are accepted, accommodated, even celebrated.

With that said, it is very difficult for my work to continue, and for Halal This Way, LLC to succeed, without consistent funding. For me to continue this work full time (which I have been doing for the most part without financial support), and to take my organization off the ground, I need to raise funds. Among other things, this funding will help me continue the editing process, the typesetting of the book, cover the printing costs, and some living expenses. Most importantly, however, your generous contribution will help me build this platform and ensure its continuity.

I cannot thank you enough for your support and whatever one-time or monthly contribution you choose to make as an investment in me and in Halal This Way, LLC. It has been an honor to undertake this project and to share it with you. Please consider contributing to it if you are in a position to do so.

To contribute, please go to **www.halalthisway.org**. To connect with me personally, please email: **maher@halalthisway.org**.

Salam, thank you, and best regards!

Maher Alhaj