MILLENIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS: PROMOTE GENDER EQUALITY AND EMPOWER WOMEN

LGBT Rights in the Developing World: The Role of Religion

Well, we are all aware that protecting and securing rights for LGBT persons has been a tremendously difficult task, across the world, but especially in the developing world.

Whether it be Uganda, Malawi, Iran or Malaysia, (or others of the 80 countries that criminalize consensual homosexual sex) it is clear that the last decade has seen a more draconian enforcement of existing laws and the introduction of even more punitive regimes.

Moreover although rarely presented as the explicit rationale for the introduction of these punitive laws, religions often play a critical role, both in providing the justifying belief as to why homosexuality is wrong, and also being vocal champions of regimes that discriminate against LGBT persons.

Understanding the role of religion in the debate about LGBT rights in the developing world is both important and complex.

It is very important in particular because:

- in the late 20th century religion has once again re-emerged as a significant force in the global public square.

Whereas in the twentieth century it was assumed that religion would become ever-more marginal to political life, the events of the last 2 decades suggest a more complex reality. So it appears that, around the globe, many people are turning again to religion, and this is the case in economically advanced societies as well as in the developing world, although for the most part they are not returning to the traditional religious institutions, but instead are attracted to its more informal, evangelical and often more conservative and oppositional, separatist manifestations.

In this context moreover it is important to remember that for most religious believers religion is inescapably political and cannot be relegated to the private realm. So, in common with other citizens, religious believers expect to have a say in shaping public policy, especially on the critical ethical issues, and particularly on issues on which religious traditions have a lot to say – typically issues associated with sexuality and gender equality, marriage.
• It is a complex matter however because: **it is often difficult to dismantle the culture-religion nexus**, not only because in many countries indigenous religions are the indigenous culture and historically there was no separation of the two, but also because as Christianity and Islam became embedded through Africa and Asia those religions became transformed through their encounters with the indigenous cultures and religions – so we have both inculturation and inter-cultural interaction. (encounter of a plurality of traditions)

I don’t want to make a very elaborate point, I simply want to suggest that **there is rarely a clear and distinct dividing line between religion and culture** – rather they are overlaid and enmeshed each with the other.

• Because of this culture-religion nexus if one wants to understand the gender order the **insight into religion** is fundamental. Historically many cultural contexts are bound up with religious values, world-views, foundational stories, so, it is difficult to come to an understanding of the gender order (and of sexual relationships) without attending to the impact (whether overt or not) of religion.

**There is a significant diversity of perspectives within different religious tradition on LGBT rights**, which I will speak about briefly later on, but for the moment I want to highlight what has been the traditional view of many religious traditions

**Namely that they tend not to support LGBT rights, and the tend to base their opposition to LGBT rights on three interlocking dimensions –**

a) arguments from natural law/Quranic law, or other religiously sanctioned law (the natural complementarity of the sexes; the significance of the reproductive function of sex and the nature of marriage as founded on the natural complementarity of the sexes).

b) arguments from the sacred texts/scriptures – based on the textual evidence; the hermeneutical questions – how to interpret these texts – different views

c) arguments from tradition – with the claim that there has been an unchanging and constant tradition of condemnation.
Let me say something brief about each:

a) arguments from natural law/Quranic law, or other religiously sanctioned law

The root of these arguments from natural law are in something that may religious traditions have historically shared, namely – **patriarchal and misogynistic ideologies about gender and sexuality**, and these are at the root of the religious opposition to LGBT rights in the developing world.

This is a vast subject, and there is always the danger of over-simplifying the issue, however I want to draw attention to some critical perspectives that one finds across all the major world religions. These are:

- an ambivalence about bodies, especially female bodies,

- a strong view about the nature of the gender order, in particular a view that the gender order is **natural and fixed** underpinned by regulations (usually claimed to have some **divine sanction**) about gender roles and sexual relationships, and

- a strong commitment to the complementarity of the sexes,

From the late 1960s onwards feminist scholarship in religion changed the landscape fundamentally in terms of how theological discussions about gender and sexuality were conducted.

Prior to this little attention was given to the ongoing impact of the patriarchal heritage, however subsequently feminist theologians began to analyse the scale and depth of the misogyny inherent in the traditions and practices first of Christianity and subsequently of other religious traditions.

From these analyses one can see that, running through of the different historical periods of theo-politics, (whether they be Christian, Islamic, or Hindu, or Jewish), there has been a deep-seated ambivalence, not only towards the body, but especially towards the female body.

So in the texts and traditions of the major world religions one can discern a ‘fear and loathing’ of bodies, particularly of women’s bodies. Moreover, the fear and loathing is exaggerated because of the tradition’s tendency to view the meaning and significance of bodiliness exclusively, or at least primarily, through the lens of sexuality.
Following on from these critiques we have seen an interrogation of how different religions view the nature and significance of sexual difference – indeed this question about the ethical significance of the biological differences between men and women has become a lightening-rod within many religious traditions.

In most religious traditions, the ideology that has traditionally governed gender relations has been that of complementarity. This doctrine of complementarity is based on the claim that the differences between male and female are ontological, not social, part of our essential makeup- and this is the fundamental principle governing all issues of sexuality and relationships.

Indeed I would say that, for the most part, religious traditions have essentialised sexual difference and sacralised complementarity. As a result alternative ways of narrating sexual identity have tended to be ignored, criminalised or pathologised.

However, in contemporary theological contexts and amongst many religious believers these long-dominant assumptions are currently undergoing interrogation. Moreover, theologies of complementarity are especially under the spotlight, and are the subject of ongoing contestation.

b) arguments from the sacred texts/scriptures – based on the textual evidence; the hermeneutical questions – how to interpret these texts – different views

This is really a vast subject, but most religious traditions have a spectrum – literalist readings of sacred texts (usually a minority) to approaches that see these texts as holding a core message about justice, compassion and equality and also being vehicles of the prevailing social norms of the day, that now have to be challenged, re-interpreted etc –

c) arguments from tradition – with the claim that there has been an unchanging and constant tradition of condemnation.

In this context religions tend to present themselves as unchanging and uniform in their belief systems and moral values –

However I want to suggest however that such a simplistic view of religion is neither warranted nor defensible
since it fails to acknowledge that religions have changed and continue to change, and also that they involve significant internal differences that tend to be hidden from those outside the religion.

Let me give one example from the tradition I know best – Roman Catholicism – The historian John Noonan has demonstrated that this idea of a fixed and unchanging moral tradition is a fiction. In fact he characterizes the Catholic church’s moral tradition thus:
what was forbidden became lawful (the cases of usury and marriage);
what was permissible became unlawful (the case of slavery);
what was required became forbidden (the persecution of heretics);\(^1\)

So whether one examines the Roman Catholic church’s tradition on marriage, on divorce, on abortion, on slavery, on conscientious objection to war or on religious freedom one encounters an always evolving, often inconsistent, and occasionally contradictory body of thought.

Studies in comparative religious ethics confirm that a similar trajectory, especially in respect of morality, is in evident in all of the other major world religions. Indeed even if the most conservative of religious believers speak about the universality of certain religious truths,

they also reluctantly acknowledge that these religious truths need to be interpreted in each particular historical context.

Scholars of Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism, as well as Judaism and Christianity (and all of traditions they generated, such as Sikhism and Jainism) confirm this evolutionary nature of religious traditions, even if religious leaders often down-play its significance.

Conversations and processes that aim at meaningful religious and cultural exchange on critical issues, such as gender, sexuality, family, reproductive health etc., ignore the constructed-ness of religious and cultural traditions at their peril.

Viewed through the historical lens one can see that each tradition is embedded in political processes that have involved:

- choices between various and varying interpretations of the community's history;
- power struggles over the authorisation and legitimation of the community's traditions;
- disagreements about the criteria for belonging; and
- debates about where the power to define the limits of the tradition resides.

**Theorists of culture** like Homi Bhaba argue in a similar vein that neither can cultures be thought of as unitary, homogenous or distinct – so it is with religion -

This perspective, in my view represents the best hope for a constructive engagement on LGBT rights and religion

- Recognising the itinerary of silence associated with many religious traditions - who gets to speak? And on whose behalf? Who has been silenced, marginalized – here it is all about gender

- And the importance of the internal critic

- Recognising that religions are neither static nor unitary but rather are dynamic and internally diverse.

Thus the space for inter-religious and cross-cultural debate on critical moral issues will inevitably be enlarged when it is accepted that religions are products of historical and political processes through which their distinctiveness is constructed, and according to which the parameters of orthodoxy are drawn.

It is important that the **presence of internal debate** within cultural or religious groups be **acknowledged**, especially when such contestation may be focused on what might be regarded as exclusionary values or of discriminatory practices.

**e.g. feminist religious reform movements**, found in all the major world’s religions, and more recently among indigenous and native religious traditions, which have developed new interpretations of sacred texts, beliefs and practices in which gender equality and dignity are to the fore, and which have become the centre-piece of their understanding of their religion.
Making common cause – religion can be a force for conservatism or for liberal values and human rights – essential that the progressive elements within religious traditions bemarshalled in the service of human rights, and in this case in terms of LGBT rights.