

## Forum looks at plight of gay Muslims

By Tirdad Derakhshani

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What does it mean to be a gay Muslim? Is it even possible to be both?

> Given the repressive nature of Muslim countries such as Saudi Arabia, why would any self-respecting gay man or woman want to be a Muslim?

> Those are some of the troubling questions raised by filmmaker Parvez Sharma's new documentary, *A Jihad for Love*, which tells the stories of more than a dozen gay and lesbian Muslims scattered across the globe from South Africa to Iran, Cairo to Paris, all of whom reaffirm their devotion to Islam, a religion that seems anathema to many of their Western friends and lovers.

> "Everyone in the film is coming out as a Muslim as opposed to coming out as a gay person," Sharma said.

> His film will be screened tomorrow at the Prince Music Theater in Center City as part of the 16th annual Equality Forum, a civil rights symposium and festival for the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender communities taking place across the city daily through Sunday.

> The forum's executive director, Malcolm Lazin, said he expected 75,000 people to participate in the weeklong event, which began Monday and features three dozen lectures, panel discussions, parties, and other special events on a wide range of topics.

> "When we began in 1993, there were only pride parades in this country," Lazin said. "By focusing on civil rights issues, we offered a different paradigm."

> Lazin said the 61 organizations represented at the event this week deal with issues such as hate-crime legislation, same-sex marriage and civil unions, and workplace non-discrimination legislation.

> "And this year, as part of our international program, we will focus on the lives of gays and lesbians in the Muslim world," he said. The programs include a panel discussion on that topic tonight and a talk on Sunday by Irshad Manji, author of the best-seller *The Trouble With Islam Today: A Muslim's Call for Reform in Her Faith*, which provides a powerful, if controversial critique of contemporary Islam.

> "It's hard to generalize," Lazin said, "but by and large the status of gays in the Muslim world, especially the Middle East, is bleak. . . . If you are known as gay, you are liable to be arrested, even tortured."

> The worst offender, Lazin said, is most likely Iran.

> "Homosexuality in the Islamic Republic of Iran is punishable by death," said Arsham Parsi, an Iranian-born, Toronto-based civil rights activist who founded the Iranian Queer Organization (IRQO). Parsi, who will speak tonight as part of the Muslim World panel, said some judges show mercy and give the offenders - usually college-age young people arrested at private parties - 100 lashes of the whip.

> Parsi, 27, who fled Iran in 2005, said he was driven to activism by personal tragedy: Two of his closest friends committed suicide because of their sexuality. Parsi said he had felt accepted for the first time in his life when he met the two young men.

> "I found them after 18 years" of loneliness, he said. "And they committed suicide for who they are. They died for nothing."

> Parsi said IRQO gives gay Iranians in and outside the country a way to connect with like-minded people.

> With that foundation in place, the next step, he said, is to "bring sexuality from the closet to the kitchen table," so that gays can begin reconnecting with their families.

> "And someday soon, hopefully, from kitchen to marketplace and the world."

> Sharma, the film director, said one of the most difficult issues for gay Muslims is to find a space where they can both affirm their religion - especially to Westerners who may denigrate it out of ignorance - and critique religious leaders and politicians who use religion to oppress gays and other minorities.

> "At a time when Islam is so under attack, we need to hear from Muslims who do not speak about jihad in terms of violence," Sharma said, "but those who see jihad as an internal, spiritual struggle."

> Sharma said that as a gay Muslim living in America, he has often felt he must defend and justify himself as a Muslim to fellow gay men and women and fellow liberals while defending his sexual orientation from attacks by Islamic traditionalists.

> Sharma, who will speak both at tonight's panel and Sunday at his film screening, said he was lucky to grow up in India, which is far more tolerant of sexual minorities than Iran or Saudi Arabia.

> Travel writer Michael Luongo, who will moderate tonight's panel, said the issue of gay rights is complicated in countries such as Iran and Egypt, where any talk about sexuality is often taboo.

> Luongo, who writes about the lives of ordinary Muslim gay men and women in *Gay Travels in the Muslim World*, said people from the Middle East usually discuss sex in terms of discrete acts ("he had sex with a man last week") while modern Westerners think of sexuality in terms of identity ("he is a homosexual").

> "Victorian diplomats were shocked to see that it was considered normal to have some same-sex relations in Turkish or Arabian royal courts," Luongo said. "But would any of those Muslim men say they are 'gay' or 'bisexual'? The concept was just not known."

> Luongo said that creates a communications barrier that can be difficult to overcome.

> Filmmaker John Scagliotti, who created the public TV show *In the Life* and is also on tonight's panel, said, "Some critics from the Muslim world say gay identity is a Western identity construct which activists and academics are foisting upon Muslims.

> "I say if a gay person is being imprisoned or hung, I have a right to say something about it.

> "And I'm not being an imperialist for saying so."

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#### If You Go

> All events are free and open to the public. For information visit [www.equalityforum.com](http://www.equalityforum.com).

> **Gays and Lesbians in the Muslim World** Panel discussion at Prince Music Theater, 1412 Chestnut St. Tonight from 7 to 8:15.

> **A Jihad for Love** Film screening and discussion with director Parvez Sharma and producer Sandi DuBowski at Prince Music Theater. Tomorrow 7:30-9:30 p.m.

> **Irshad Manji** Talk by author of *The Trouble With Islam Today*. At National Constitution Center, 525 Arch St. Sunday from 2 to 3:15 p.m.


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