

Coming to Grips with the Queer Festival and Deeper Concerns

There has been a great deal of talk about the upcoming Queer Festival in Sarajevo. However, the discussion has taken on a bitter tone because some have made much of the fact that the organizers plan to hold the festival during the month of Ramadan. To hold the festival during that time, according to some pious Muslims, is a blasphemous act, one that is rude and disrespectful towards those of the faith. Of course, we must not forget that this festival is following on the heels of another festival, the Sarajevo Film Festival. A few films touched on the subject of homosexuality (LA LEON, 2007), but I do not remember hearing much, if any, disapproval of screening films of the gay and lesbian genre. Perhaps the festival's international acclaim, it not being held during Ramadan, and the genre's thin representation had something to do with the lack of criticism. What I find remarkable about the upcoming festival is not when it will be held, but that it will be held; that members of various sexual communities, including the gay and lesbian community of Sarajevo (and, no doubt, many from the "straight" community), have united to put on a

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queer festival as a public event. Unless the gay and lesbian community is different from the rest of the population of Sarajevo, it is composed of many who also consider themselves Muslim. Surely they feel no less religious, no less Muslim, than those heterosexual members of the faith who drink alcohol and smoke cigarettes at City Pub while hearing the call to pray from Gazi-Husrevbey or who engage in "illicit" sexual behavior at home while the parents stroll Ferhadija looking for sweets. Of course, these are not the same people who criticize the queer festival in the media, but they could be their sons and daughters, nephews and nieces. Perhaps religiosity and sexuality are parallel planes of our lives that sometimes collide whether we like it or not. This aspect of our all too human lives is not about to go away any time soon. When all is said and done, however, it is not the shock value of the festival and

the debate about its timing that should exhaust our attention. We should also think about how people struggle to reconcile their sexual orientation with their religion, with their being gay or lesbian and Muslim; and how members of the Muslim community struggle to find it within themselves to embrace members of their own faith whose sexual orientation they disapprove of as unbecoming of a Muslim. Perhaps the talk about the festival is just a reflection of those deeper concerns.

Some do not want Bosnia to be a tolerant society when it comes to sexuality. They accept the presence of ethnic politics, but homosexuality, for example, is something they cannot agree to. Yet if Bosnia is to be known once again for its diversity and tolerance, its people must remember that an open society not only allows speech and assembly that it likes and when it likes it, but that it allows speech and assembly of that which it dislikes and at those times when it disapproves of those words and gatherings the most. Clearly, those critical of the festival have taken advantaged of this permissive environment in voicing their dissent. But what is also notable is the fact that the state has not seen fit to pass laws restricting events like the queer festival. So festival supporters and opponents alike have come face-to-face with what it means to live in a somewhat liberal, albeit fragile, democracy. Its fragility, however, is inherent because individuals ultimately need to engage in dialogue to smooth over differences and to work with each other's sensibilities. It is never an easy path, and at times it brings out the worst in people. In this case, perhaps some of those who think of themselves as pious Muslims have taken up the chauvinism of heterosexuality. Even so, it is likely that the supporters and opponents of the festival will eventually come to an agreement over how they can work and celebrate their faith together. However, the inner struggle that people have over their religiosity and sexuality, as well as how their religious community will accept them, will take much longer to resolve.

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